

## **Library Revolution**

by Arikawa Hiro

### **Declaration of Library Freedom**

- 1. Libraries have the right to gather materials freely.**
- 2. Libraries have the right to make materials freely available.**
- 3. Libraries protect the privacy of their users.**
- 4. Libraries oppose all censorship.**

**When the freedom of the library is violated, we librarians will unite and fight to the end to protect its freedom.**

### **Prologue**

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In January of the 34th year of the Seika era--  
On the 15th, when the whole world was already caught up in Valentine's Day sales, it happened.

Deep in the night, the Tsuruga Nuclear Power Plant in Fukui Prefecture experienced a large-scale assault.

*"Behind me is the Tsuruga Nuclear Power Plant as it appears this morning!"*

The female reporter, shouting to be heard over the sound of the helicopter's rotor, leaned into the camera frame, heedless of the open door behind her.

The camera closed on the reporter, a familiar face on that channel's news show, for a moment before panning down to the ground as the aircraft banked. The rugged landscape below was covered with snow.

The shot looked down at the plant from almost directly overhead. Plumes of smoldering black smoke rose from here and there on the grounds, marking the locations of the No. 3 and No. 4 reactors, which had been constructed in recent years along Wakasa Bay.

The most striking image in the shot was the wreckage of two camouflaged helicopters that was sticking out of the sides of the

buildings. The camera zoomed in; their main rotors and tail rotors were completely destroyed, and their bodies were bent in the middle.

As the camera lingered on that ghastly sight, the voiceover was taken over by the studio.

*"This morning at three o'clock, the combat helicopters that you just saw at the Tsuruga No. 3 and No. 4 reactors flew in at low altitude and penetrated the perimeter of the plant. They crashed into the No. 3 reactor--but that was just the beginning of this catastrophe."*

*"They were quickly stalled by the safety systems at the No. 3 and No. 4 reactors. The security team at the reactor called the police and the JSDF, then suited up for battle and began a firefight with the attackers who emerged from the crash-landed helicopters."*

*"However, during that time, the Tsuruga No. 2 reactor at the tip of the Tsuruga Peninsula experienced an attack of its own."*

The screen showed a closeup of a map drawn on a clipboard. It indicated the relative positions of the new No.3 and No. 4 reactors along Wakasa Bay, which were separated by a mountain and connected by a tunnel to the older No. 1 and No. 2 reactors, along with the Japan Atomic Energy Agency's experimental Fugen reactor, on the Tateishi Cape side of the Tsuruga Peninsula.

*"For the sake of convenience, we have labeled the reactors on the Tateishi Cape side as 'former' reactors; however, though the No. 1 reactor and the Fugen reactor have been decommissioned, the No. 2 reactor is still in use. It is speculated that the assailants' plan was to cause a diversion with a conspicuous attack on the Wakasa Bay reactors while they gained control of the control room at the No. 2 reactor and caused a meltdown. Because the reactors have safety mechanisms and were designed to be strong enough to withstand light aircraft crashing into them, a random attack like the one at the Wakasa Bay reactors cannot cause a power excursion."*

*"Because of this, we can say with high probability that the attackers' goal was the No. 2 reactor. Everything about their attack on the former reactors reeks of stealth; after the sun rose, several amphibious assault landing craft were discovered on the beach near the former reactors. All of the attackers at both the old and new reactors are dead. Repeat, all the attackers are dead."*

*"According to the latest reports from the Tsuruga Nuclear Power Plant, there has been no radiation leakage. However, an evacuation order has been given to surrounding areas just to be safe. The*

*evacuation order should be called off within the day, and residents will be able to return to their homes."*

*"The Fukui police riot squad were the first to be dispatched after the call from the power plant. According to their report, the attackers were 'a very well-trained special ops team.' The landing craft left on the nearby beach, the crashed helicopters, and the weapons the assailants were carrying have all been seized by the police. Many of them were made in the former Soviet Union and the rest of the Communist Bloc, and have been identified by experts as easy for terrorists to get their hands on."*

*"The attackers were armed with recoilless rifles, heavy machine guns, and hand grenades, so the police riot squad was quickly replaced by a detachment from the Ground Self-Defense Forces from the Sabae garrison. There was a government announcement by the prefectural governor declaring a state of emergency and requesting their deployment as disaster relief, but given how swift the deployment was, the opposition party is investigating whether someone on the ground may have jumped the gun and not waited for the governor's announcement."*

*"The deaths of all the assailants has already been criticized as a cardinal mistake, since it means that none of them can be questioned..."*

*"The prefectural police chief says, 'According to reports from the Self-Defense Forces who pursued the attackers, at the end they all bit down hard and collapsed one after the other. Autopsies have revealed that they all ingested a poison that was concealed in their teeth. Since the attackers would not throw down their weapons, I must say that it would have been impossible to prevent this.'"*

*"If this incident is connected to the string of international terrorist attacks in recent years and the terror network claims it, this will be the first time Japan has been its target. It is not clear at this time if Japan's current counter-terrorism measures will be enough to respond to..."*

## Chapter 1, The Beginning

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"...Wow..."

It was still dark that time of year when Iku got out of bed at 6:30, turned on the lights, and saw the news. Her mouth dropped open and she cried out in surprise. Forgetting that in the winter Shibasaki liked to put her next day's clothes under the *kotatsu* (so that they were nice warm when it was time to leave), she gazed at the screen, her eyes devouring the images.

"...I just want to take the day off and stay glued to the TV all day..." Shibasaki said. For an information addict like Shibasaki, a major event like this was probably like heroin, but it was still a rather brazen comment. "Maybe I could pretend I caught a cold..." she continued, in a not-quite-joking tone.

Iku swatted Shibasaki's forehead. "Playing hooky because you want to surf news sites all day is going too far, no matter the circumstances!"

"But this is large-scale nuclear terrorism we're talking about! New information is going to be coming out by the minute! Controversies will be springing up all over the news and the internet! You don't feel the desire to chase down every last bit of information?"

"I don't. If everyone skipped work for the same reason as you, the world would fall into chaos."

*Oh, that might be nice,* Iku thought to herself secretly. Usually, it was practically Iku's job description to whine and be scolded and lectured by everyone around her.

"Nothing will fall into chaos if it's just meeee..."

"Don't think you can fool me with your sweet and innocent act. Anyway, don't you think you're being a little careless about this? People died defending the reactors."

"I pray that the victims have reached Heaven safely, but that's separate from my curiosity about the incident. Q.E.D."

"Q.E.D.'? Don't get cute with me! If this were something that involved the Library Force, I *might* be willing to overlook the way you're acting, but this has absolutely no connection to the library!"

The moment she said it, something niggled at the back of her mind. She thought about it for a moment, wondering if perhaps there

was a reason she should be glued to the TV like a rubbernecker, but nothing came to mind. She couldn't deny some natural curiosity, but it wasn't at the level where she wanted to shirk her duties and watch TV all day like Shibasaki.

"Look, I'm going to breakfast. You know, if I told you I wanted to play hooky for a reason like that, you'd give me a sermon."

"Nah, if it was to watch a big news story develop, I wouldn't stop you. Why? Any chance I could convert you?"

"None! Okay, I'm going to the mess hall!"

"I don't know why you're acting all high and mighty, when you and Instructor Doujou took the same day off so you could go on a date."

"Excuse me!?" Iku's eyes widened; the attack was unexpected and below the belt. "We're in the same squad, of *course* we have the same days off! And it is NOT a date! It's just something we promised a while ago to get together and do!"

"That's called a date, silly."

"It is not!" Iku shouted, her cheeks burning.

Shibasaki paid her no mind. "Come on, usually on your days off you sleep in until some leisurely hour, but today you bounced out of bed with the sun. Ohhh, if only today were my day off! I could stare at the TV and the internet all day. But you're going to spend this precious day going out with your superior officer! It's ridiculous, I just can't understand it!"

"You're the one I can't understand! Come on, it's breakfast time! Don't you have work!?"

"Nooooooo! I don't want breakfast, I'm gonna stay here and watch TV until the last possible minute..."

"Gah, fine! Do whatever you want!"

Since it seemed that Iku had at least been able to nip Shibasaki's plan to play hooky in the bud, she headed for the mess hall alone. Shibasaki's appetite was small and she never ate much in the morning, so it wasn't a big deal.

However, Iku did feel some triumph when she heard Shibasaki's scream upon discovering the state of the clothes she had left in the *kotatsu*. It was a good punishment for her foolish tantrum.

*"Today you bounced out of bed with the sun."*

It hit the mark more than she liked to admit. They weren't meeting at Musashi-sakai station until 11. From there they would go to

the shop Iku had found in Tachikawa, where they would fulfill their modest promise to go and drink *camomille* tea together.

The one who had brought up the promise, a little while after they returned from Ibaraki, was Doujou.

*"Come to think of it, you should hurry up and find a tea shop."*

Apparently seeing the flower in bloom in a greenhouse at the Ibaraki Prefectural Library had only heightened his interest.

After Shibasaki left for work, Iku opened her closet and began a period of lengthy deliberation. She thought up combination after combination and tried on outfit after outfit. At last, she stood still in the middle of a hurricane of clothes in her underwear, grateful that the heat was turned up. She almost always wore a sports-bra-and-panties set, but since today was special she was wearing a set of "normal" underwear that she almost never used. As an ostensibly adult woman, she *did* own a few push-up bras in appealing designs.

Even so, Shibasaki scoffed at them for "having no sex appeal"--but Iku didn't have the courage to buy the pretty lace-and-ribbon confections that Shibasaki and the other librarians wore, and she had accumulated only cute-but-simple patterned underwear whose selling point was "less decoration makes for a prettier line!"

*I mean, a 170 cm giantess who beats people up for a living, in delicate lacy underwear... When would I wear it?* Objective thoughts like this inhibited her while she was buying underwear.

Thus, the pair Iku was wearing now was a pale green patterned demi-bra set with almost no ornamentation; it was cute, but not striking. She thought Shibasaki would praise her for wearing a matching set; it meant she was paying attention to her fashion choices even when they were invisible.

For bottoms, she had a few skirts, but mostly jeans. For tops she had plenty of more or less feminine design--but what should she choose?

"...It'd freak him out if I dressed too much like I was trying to impress him, yeah."

That ruled out skirts. She put on jeans, a layer camisole, and a prized cardigan she had snatched up at a New Year's sale. For a coat, she chose her most cheery, a lightweight sky-blue down jacket.

She grabbed a matching bag and stood in front of the mirror, and saw with approval that she had somehow been able to come up with a coordinated outfit.

After that, she tried her hand at applying makeup. Since she was inexperienced, she used a light touch, and managed to clear that hurdle as well. Before she left, Shibasaki had told her, "You can use anything in my cosmetics box," but she had never acquired the skills required to handle all the different cosmetics and applicators in the first place. Once, Shibasaki had made her try out the eyelash curler, and she had pinched her eyelid and let out a scream.

"Okay!"

*Now all that's left are shoes--I better wear something with a low heel,* she thought, remembering the time he had rescued her from Tedzuka Satoshi and grumbled about her wearing high heels. Thinking about him, she glanced at the clock--

"WHAAAAAT!?"

She would be late to meet Doujou if she didn't leave the dorm this minute. She automatically looked at her own watch for confirmation, but of course, it showed the same time (her watch wasn't the bulky military one she always wore, but the special one for when she went out).

*Whyyy!?! I woke up at the same time I get up on workdays! I should have had more than enough time!*

There was no time to clean up the clothing she had scattered around the room while trying to choose an outfit. She had no choice; she tossed everything onto her bed, closed her bed curtains, and ran out of the room.

*It'll be okay as long as I get home before Shibasaki and clean it all up,* she thought briefly as she ran down the hall.

If Shibasaki discovered her cleaning up after an outfit-choosing frenzy that had encompassed nearly her whole wardrobe, it was certain that she would grin like the Cheshire cat, say "Looks like somebody got a little carried away..." and tease Iku mercilessly, paying her back in full for this morning.

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She ran in her half boots almost all the way from the library base to the station, but she still missed eleven o'clock by five minutes. Doujou had already climbed the steps and was waiting by the ticket machine.

"I-I'm so sorry I'm late!" Iku wheezed, and saluted.

Strangely, her apology seemed to be what set Doujou off. "Don't salute when you're out of uniform, and especially not outside the base! People will think there's something going on!"

"Oh! Yes sir!" Flustered, she brought her right hand back down to her side.

"...You know, you've always been like that, from the very beginning. You didn't have to run all the way here after you went to the trouble to dress up--it's not like this is a mission. Women are almost always late for things like this. I took that into account."

Her cheeks grew red at suddenly being treated like a woman. But since her entire face was flushed from her run, he didn't notice.

"S-Still, I thought it wouldn't be good to keep my superior officer waiting."

"I'm not so petty that I'm going to pull rank on personal time," Doujou said, a little sullenly. "Since you went to the effort to put together such a...stylish outfit, it would have been a shame if you had tripped and fallen on the way."

"I-It's not like I went to *that* much effort, or like I'm dressed up really special or anything, so you don't have to concern yourself one little bit!" Iku babbled--and Doujou smiled just a little, or so it appeared.

"I can understand being so flustered about being late that you ran all the way. I'm sorry for dragging you all the way out here just to do me a favor."

*Noooooooo! Quit smiling and being nice to me like that!* she shouted at him in her mind, but there was no way that Doujou could hear that.

"You look pretty different yourself, Instructor Doujou. I think this could be the first time I've seen you in regular clothes."

Wanting to at least get off the topic that was causing her distress, she changed the subject herself. Doujou was wearing jeans, but his clothes were of unexpectedly fine quality (though perhaps it was rude to call it unexpected) and the lines were sharp. On normal days he wore suits even for plainclothes missions, and at the dorm they both wore tracksuits most of the time, so it was strange for Iku too, to see Doujou thus attired.

"Komaki likes shopping, so he goes around and picks stuff out from all kinds of places, but I'm hopeless. It's too much of a hassle. If I buy everything at the same store, I can be sure it matches."



"Oh, I see. I have this problem--I'll buy stuff impulsively at sales, thinking I'll wear it, and I almost always end up with buyer's remorse. I guess you get what you pay for."

"Well, you're young. When you get to be my age, it's just easier to buy good-quality stuff that lasts a long time."

It was a frivolous conversation, but it was that very frivolity that made it enjoyable. It continued until Iku had finally caught her breath.

"So, what destination should I buy tickets for?"

"Um, Tachikawa..."

"Wait here," Doujou said, and headed for the ticket machine. When he came back, he handed one of the tickets to Iku.

"Ah, thank you."

*Oh. He waited for me to catch my breath. When she realized that, her heart started beating fast all over again.*

"So what should we do? Eat lunch first?"

"Oh, the tea shop has food as well...so we can drink the tea after we eat lunch."

Herbs seemed to be the theme of the cafe Iku had chosen; their entrées, teas, and desserts were all as herb-based as they could be.

Since it was still a little before lunchtime on a weekday, the cafe was empty, and they were guided to the best table in the house, in the corner next to the window.

"Do you have any recommendations?"

"Um, the chicken sautéed in herbs, maybe, just in terms of volume."

"Then I'll get that."

Doujou asked her for advice as they looked over their menus, and when they were done they called the server over. Iku placed their orders, since she had been to the cafe several times before.

"We'd like two chicken lunch specials, with rice, please. And at the end, one chamomile tea for him, and I'll have the apple mousse dessert special with chamomile tea."

"The dessert special is 150 yen more when you order it with herbal tea, is that alright?"

"That's fine."

Just before Iku finished putting in their order, Doujou raised a hand.

"Pardon me, I'd like the dessert special with chamomile tea as well."

As Iku looked on in open-mouthed shock, Doujou asked for the soufflé cheesecake and concluded their order.

"...Is there a problem?" he asked grumpily, glaring at Iku.

"No...I just didn't expect you to want dessert."

"I like desserts, if they're not too rich."

"Oh, but I think you were right to get the soufflé cheesecake. Chamomile has a delicate flavor, so a cake with a stronger flavor might overpower it."

"I don't need your approval!" Doujou put his chin in his hands and looked away, affronted.

His expression caused Iku to burst out laughing. "Instructor Doujou, you can be kind of adorable sometimes."

Doujou didn't say anything for a long moment. At last, he turned a steady gaze on Iku.

"So can you."

"I can?"

"Your face looks different. Different than it usually does."

"What?" Her hands flew up to cover her face. "What do you mean!? What's different about it?"

"It's more feminine than usual."

"Th-That's just because...!"

This time it was Iku's turn to explode. "When I go off-base on my own, I at least put on makeup, okay!? But not too much, I don't think...! Is it weird!? Do I look weird!?"

She couldn't claim to have any confidence in her ability to put on makeup, and that self-doubt was behind her hysteria.

It was true that her lipstick was a little darker than the one she wore during plainclothes patrol duty, and she was wearing blush, though only a hint. *What if it's too heavy?* she wondered, and suddenly couldn't sit still.

"Excuse me, I'm just going to go to the ladies'..." she said, already rising, when Doujou reached out and grabbed her arm.

"No one said it looked weird."

*Oh.*

Iku sat back down with a *thump*.

Her knees wouldn't support her anymore.

"*Cheater,*" she whispered to herself, and wouldn't look up until the flush on her cheeks had receded.

The moment of truth had come. A pot of hot water had been set before each of them, infused solely with chamomile flowers.

"It looks like green tea, at least color-wise," Doujou said, pouring a cup and bringing it to his nose. "It smells a little different from the oil you gave me, somehow..."

"The flowers that made the oil were selected especially for their fragrance, so I think it makes sense that they'd be different."

"But still, it's an inoffensive smell. Should go down easy."

"How does it taste?"

"Don't rush me." Doujou deflected Iku's badgering as he brought his cup to his lips. "I've never had herbal tea before so I have nothing to compare it to, but it does go down easy. It *does* remind me of green tea..."

"It has a calming effect--sometimes people call it 'good night tea.'"

"Starting tomorrow, I'm ordering you to stock it in the office and drink it every day."

"That wasn't nice!"

Iku pouted as she poured and drank her own tea.

"Aren't you going to eat your cake?"

She meant to tease him in payback for his sarcastic remark, but Doujou didn't bite.

"After you went to all the trouble to bring me here, I want to drink the first cup without mixing it with any other flavors."

"It wasn't...you can come back any time, you know. Now that you know where the cafe is. I wouldn't mind coming back..."

*With you. Any time.* In the end, she couldn't say those words.

"But this is the first time you've brought me here."

*And because of that, I'm going to savor the first cup.* The fact that Doujou could say that as if it were a matter of course made her fall in love with him all over again.

It was fine when they were talking about the cafe and *camomille* on the way over. It was fine while they were talking about the the food as they ate. But now that they were relaxed and drinking tea together after the meal, it was starting to feel more and more like the "date" Shibasaki had teased her about, and she grew nervous.

She was alone with the person she loved, and together they were drinking tea that reminded them of a revered superior. Somehow--it produced the strong illusion that there was some sort of special relationship between them.

*But no! There isn't! Just a one-sided infatuation--he doesn't love you!* As she tried to bring herself back down to earth, she searched for a topic that wouldn't accidentally lead to romantic thoughts. *Right! Something big happened today, didn't it!*

"By the way, did you see the news this morning? Incredible, wasn't it."

"Ah, you mean the attack at Tsuruga." As she thought, Doujou had checked the news too.

"Shibasaki wanted to play hooky; I had such a hard time making her go to work. She was like, 'I just want to stay glued to the TV all day.'"

"Well, that's about what I'd expect from her," Doujou said, smiling wryly. He poured himself a second cup of tea and applied his fork to his soufflé cheesecake.

"Instructor Doujou, did you see the entire report?"

"Yeah."

"Something about the incident reminded me of something...or like I should know something about it. Has something like it happened before?" Iku asked, head cocked.

Doujou answered matter-of-factly. "You're thinking of *The Reactor Crisis*. Touma Kurato's book."

The title and name did indeed ring a bell. "You're right!" Iku said, her voice raised in excitement. "It's kinda like the plot of that book!"

"It's not 'kinda like,' it's exactly the same. At ten, the news was buzzing with speculation that the terrorists might have used it as a handbook. You didn't see it?"

"Uh...by that time I was so anxious about what I was going to wear that I wasn't really paying attention to the TV..." Realizing that she had just admitted to worrying about her clothes until the last minute, she clapped a hand over her mouth in horror. "Forget what I just said! I meant, after Shibasaki went to work, I turned the TV off, that's all!"

Doujou smiled wryly and sipped his tea. "You can admit that you put effort into dressing up, it's okay. It suits you. You don't look like you're trying too hard to impress me."

He had seen right through her. Her brain felt like it was going to melt. "I-It's not like I was that flustered! This is about what I normally wear when I go out!"

"Really? *I* was flustered," Doujou said, and this time Iku went still. "Even I get flustered about my clothes, before an event I'm looking forward to."

"You were really...looking forward to it? Coming out with me?" she said, accidentally voicing her wishful interpretation of his words. She wrestled herself back under control. "I mean, the *camomille* tea!"

"I was looking forward to that too, of course."

*Gah, what did he mean by that!?* Talk about *ambiguous!* She couldn't look Doujou in the eye, and lowered her head until her nose was almost touching the apple mousse on her fork.

"Um...I was looking forward to it too."

"Looking forward to what? In what way?"

He knew the answer; he was just teasing her, and Iku knew it. Her head snapped up and she glared at him. "Probably in the same way you were, Instructor Doujou."

"Well, I'd say that's lucky for both of us, then," Doujou said, casually closing the topic. "Anyway," he said, looking at Iku, "I'm surprised you've read Touma Kurato's books. Most of them are pretty hard-core conspiracy thrillers."

"I like the camaraderie between the men, and the rivalries, and the romance with the heroine that shows up in between the conspiracy parts! I can't read the part where he tries to say a last goodbye to his lover without crying! I've read the whole series!"

"...So you've almost completely forgotten the main plot, I'm assuming?"

"Yes, sir! I skim all the complicated parts. I read it solely for the characters. Do you have a problem with that?"

"No...your talent has taken me by surprise, that's all. I didn't know one *could* read that series solely for the characters."

"I read mysteries the same way. After the big reveal at the end, I'm like, 'ohhh, so that's how it happened!' It's a lot of fun for me that way."

With a mournful expression, Doujou rubbed the bridge of his nose. "Komaki would weep if he heard that..."

"Why? At the end I'm always genuinely surprised--like 'whoa, didn't see that coming!' Don't you think an author would love to have a reader like me? I never, ever guess the twists ahead of time--I'm the most reassuring reader an author could have."

"Be that as it may!" Doujou looked like he was about to start weeping himself--apparently he too enjoyed mysteries.

"What kind of books do you read, Instructor Doujou?"

"Me? When I read fiction, a lot of conspiracy and action thrillers, I guess. Some mysteries, thanks to Komaki's influence. And then some nonfiction and how-to books."

"Come to think of it, as a squad we've never talked about what kind of books we like. I like action thrillers too!"

"Don't say anything more! When I think about you reading this book, or that book, 'for the characters,' it ruins the whole essence of the work!"

"Excuse me! I understand the essence, I think!"

"The fact that you just said 'I think' makes me very nervous! Anyway, let's see, what about Shibasaki? What does she read?" Apparently Doujou wanted to avoid hearing specific examples of Iku's literary taste at all costs, and was rather blatantly fleeing the subject. Iku scowled at him, but answered.

"She's unexpectedly fond of romances. Even though she yells at them. 'Dammit, if I'm so attractive why can't I find a man like this one!?' And then she also reads books about economics--she loves books about portfolio management or megabanks, and every year she buys company reorganization charts. I have no idea what she finds so interesting about them, though."

"Somehow I'm both surprised and not surprised at all."

"What about Tedzuka?"

"He likes suspense, I think. Lately I've seen him walking around with picture books every so often."

Iku wondered if it was due to all the trouble he had had during the promotion exam. If that was the case, it was very typical of Tedzuka, who was a hard worker on top of being naturally brilliant. Now that she thought about it, Tedzuka no longer froze when children addressed him, but squatted down and talked to them directly.

"What genres does Instructor Komaki read, other than mysteries?"

"He reads almost anything. He probably has the most range of any of us. He even reads light novels--probably because he enjoys exchanging recommendations with Marié-chan."

"Aww, they're so in love."

*Lucky*, she thought to herself, gazing at Doujou quietly over the rim of her teacup.

*I wonder what it feels like to have someone you're in love with love you back. It would be wonderful if this man was the first one to return my love. No, but it's his choice to make, after all...*

"Commander Genda and...Special Advisor Inamine like historical novels." Doujou fumbled Inamine's title, probably because he still hadn't quit gotten rid of the habit of calling Inamine "Commander." And probably a little because he wished Inamine still *were* the Base Commander. "They have a lot of the same favorites. Special Advisor Inamine also read a lot of business and law books for work, though."

"Speaking of Commander Genda, he's being transferred to a hospital nearby soon, I heard."

"Yep..." In an unusual display, Doujou fell face-forward onto the table. "He's recovering unreasonably fast considering his age, that geezer...he even sent away Orikuchi-san after a month."

"Should you really be calling your commander a geezer?" she teased him.

Doujou scowled up at Iku from his position on the table. "Gimme a break and let me complain a little when it's just the two of us."

*Just the two of us.* The phrase made her heart skip a beat.

She didn't know what to say, so she took a drink of her tea and nodded firmly.

*Shoot, I got into girl mode.* She realized that she was taking smaller bites of her apple mousse than usual, and it bothered her. *Do you think acting all sweet and ladylike is going to help you now? He already knows what you're really like!*

Doujou, finishing up his tea, spoke again. "What are you doing after this?"

"What do you mean?" She was going to head back to the base-- what other option could there be? Iku cocked her head in puzzlement.

Doujou looked at his watch and said, "It's only a little after two, and since we're out here and it's our day off, it would be a waste to go back now. Want to see a movie or something?"

*Oh my god! Could this get any more like a stereotypical date!?*  
*But--*

Doujou seemed unhappy about the idea of bringing the time they were spending together to a close. It was a cheering thought in any case.

Tongue-tied, she nodded emphatically again.

"What kind of movies do you like?"

"Uh, I like flashy ones. Movies with good action sequences or explosions or CG."

"I'm not the least bit surprised," Doujou laughed. He took out his phone and started scanning the movie listings--

And almost simultaneously, their phones began to ring.

"Hello, this is Kasahara." *Dammit, who's calling me at a time like this!?* she thought as she answered. It was Shibasaki.

"Sorry to bother you in the middle of your date," Shibasaki said, wasting no time in getting a dig in, and Iku exploded.

"That is not what this is!"

"That is not what this is!" Doujou shouted in stereo across from her. They wore identical expressions of wary confusion as they each turned away to pay attention to their own phone calls.

"By the way, the one who's on the phone with Instructor Doujou is Instructor Komaki. The way you had identical reactions to being interrupted was a little much--but it's nice that you're getting along as well as usual."

From Shibasaki's explanation, she understood that Doujou had just received a similar ribbing from Komaki.

"We are not..." she mumbled, her face turning red. She had shouted at Shibasaki out of bashfulness--but why had Doujou? It bothered her a little.

"In any case, sorry to break up your date. The two of you need to get back here ASAP. We're dealing with a sudden emergency here."

"Emergency?"

"We'll explain when you get back--it's a bit of a delicate matter."

That was all Shibasaki would say before she hung up.

At almost the same time, Doujou lowered his phone too.

"...Well, I guess we'll have to save the movie for next time."

Iku had just been thinking morosely, *Darn it, I really wanted to see a movie with Instructor Doujou*, when her mood was salvaged by his comment. *Wait, there's going to be a next time...?*

"I'm glad we at least we got to sit and drink *camomille* tea," Doujou said as he picked up the check and headed for the register. Iku expected to pay her share as a matter of course, so when Doujou made to pay for both of them, she interrupted quickly.

"I-I'll pay for my part!"

"Don't worry about it this time--think of it as your fee for guiding me here. I mean, you wasted part of your day off on a favor to me."



"I didn't think of it as a waste! I've been looking forward to coming here with you for a long time too!"

Doujou, who had settled the bill and was putting on his coat, laughed softly. "You always turn so sincere at the last minute," he said, tapping Iku's face lightly. "Okay, starting next time, we'll go Dutch."

"--Yes, sir!"

Iku put on her sky-blue jacket and tagged along behind Doujou as he left the cafe.

\*

They returned to Musashi-sakai and followed the road to the base, where the atmosphere couldn't have been more different than it had been this morning.

Among the pedestrians, mixed in with the ordinary people, were those who couldn't keep intimidating expressions off their faces.

Their numbers increased as they neared the base. After almost three years, Iku could recognize them on sight: the Improvement Special Agency. And from their age and attire, she could tell that most of them were high-ranking.

"Instructor..."

She had never encountered Improvement troops while she was totally out of uniform and on personal business. She wasn't carrying a weapon or any equipment, and if their enemies--who were certain to have weapons concealed beneath their suits and jackets--were to challenge them...

"It's okay. People like them won't be trying to catch people like us. What merit is there in capturing a couple of librarians?" Doujou grabbed her hand and squeezed it in reassurance. "Act normal. Too much caution will make you look more suspicious."

Her face burned at the sudden touch of his hand. She felt nervous and awkward holding hands with him; perhaps Doujou picked up on her feelings, for he turned around to look at her.

"No!" Reflexively, she threw up the hand that wasn't holding his to hide her face. "Don't look at me!"

"Gotcha. I'll pretend I didn't see anything." There was a rare teasing tone to his voice. "Not your bright red cheeks, nothing."

"Stop it, you bully!" Without thinking, she smacked Doujou on the back with her free hand.

"Ow! Learn to pull your punches, you idiot!" As he scolded Iku, Doujou led her through the entrance to the base--and even after they entered the building, he made no move to release Iku's hand.

"Maybe we should go change our clothes first?" Iku asked self-consciously. Doujou was taking them straight to the Task Force office, and it would be obvious to everyone that they had just been out together.

But Doujou just said, "It doesn't matter to me. Komaki said time was of the essence. Who cares about clothes at a time like this? --Also, we have the right to use our days off however we see fit."

But Doujou was wrong on one count.

"...Er, looks like you two have become...better friends? How...nice?" Komaki said the moment they entered the office, seemingly a little lost for words.

Shibasaki whistled.

Doujou looked confused and wary, and Iku, not sure what to say, whispered to him, "Um, your hand..."

Doujou had been holding Iku's hand all through the building, and he had forgotten to release it before entering the office. When he realized it, he shook off her hand as if it had burned him.

"I...She was running too slowly!"

"But her legs are indisputably longer than yours, sir," Tedzuka retorted in a rare move.

Doujou glared up at him. "Stay out of it! You think you're so smart?"

There was no one in the office but Doujou's squad, Shibasaki, and Acting Commander Ogata. Ogata began to speak, in his usual laid-back tones. "All the squads on duty today are out there augmenting our security. You saw the situation outside?"

"Just on the way here. We saw a large number of high-ranking Improvement troops." Doujou's tone was suddenly all business. Their colleagues, who had been teasing them moments before, had also settled down.

"What on earth is going on?" Iku was asking, when the door of the commander's office opened. Despite his appointment to the position of acting commander, Ogata never used it, and it had turned into a simple visitors' room.

Orikuchi emerged. And in her wake followed a middle-aged man--

"*Touma Kurato!*?" Doujou cried, forgetting an honorific in his surprise. Halfway through he realized his own rudeness, for he appended "...-sensei" after a noticeable pause.

"What? He is?" Iku exclaimed. It was the very author they had been talking about during their date (if it was alright to call it that). "How do you know!?"

"What the hell kind of idiot are you!?! There's a picture of him...in every book, but I suppose that wouldn't matter for you." Doujou sighed, remembering how bad Iku's memory for faces was. Though it was more fair to say that Doujou was quite the fanatic, for recognizing an author from his picture. Touma was a man nearing his sixtieth birthday, and aside from longish snow-white hair and glasses with thick black rims, he didn't have many distinguishing features.

"Touma-sensei has gotten a lot of exposure though interviews, and his face is known by a great many people. It's no wonder that Doujou-kun recognized him," Orikuchi put in.

Iku scratched her head awkwardly. "I'm sorry, my memory for faces is bad, so I didn't recognize you, but I'm a big fan."

"Don't tell him *what* kind of fan you are, don't you dare say a word about it! He'll think the Library Task Force is full of idiots!" Doujou warned her with a demonic expression. He then turned back to Orikuchi, understanding that the explanation was likely to come from her.

"Around noon today, the Tsuruga reactor attack was ruled an act of indiscriminate international terrorism, and a special counter-terrorism bill was passed with unprecedented speed. Right after that, several companies, from newspapers to Sesousha--to be precise, all the publishers that worked with Touma-sensei--were asked for information about him."

Shibasaki found a chair for Touma, and Tedzuka found one for Orikuchi. Iku watched them, head cocked. Just when had Shibasaki and Tedzuka gotten so in step with each other?

"Naturally, the authority of several governmental organizations was expanded by this new law. Mostly the police and the Self-Defense Forces--" but if it had stopped there, the publishers wouldn't have been specifically notified "--but also several Ministry organizations. The Media Improvement Committee is one of those."

"...Why!?" Iku cried out. Indeed she didn't understand at all. "How and why are its powers being expanded even more!?"

In contrast to the snarling Iku, Doujou murmured in a low voice. "Is it about *The Reactor Crisis*?"

The book had a plot that resembled the attack enough to make one wonder if it had been used as a handbook by the terrorists, and was accurate and detailed enough to make that possible.

*So if the terrorists used it as a textbook--*

Iku looked straight at Orikuchi, praying that Orikuchi would put her fears to rest.

"I don't know where the idea first came from. All I know is, the view that *The Reactor Crisis* was a book so dangerous it could be used as a handbook for terrorists, and someone who could write such a book should not be free to keep writing, is dominating the situation room at the prime minister's office."

"What!? No! If that's what they're saying..."

"Exactly," Orikuchi nodded wearily. "If they get their hands on Touma-sensei, I know all too well what they would do to him."

They wouldn't let Touma go until they had forced him to give up his right to write freely. The Improvement Committee was a hunting dog that had been released for that very purpose.

"And Touma-sensei is probably just the first in a series of authors who will be hunted down. And, of course, the people who agree with them."

Ironically, the special counter-terrorism bill was on its way to starting a large-scale witch-hunt, under the name of maintaining security.

Touma could not be allowed to be captured. Iku chewed over this simple rule. For Iku, it was good when rules were as simple as possible. It was when rules got complicated that an idiot like herself got confused and lost her quick reflexes.

"To me, the fact that all the newspaper companies leaked this news is a hopeful sign. But it was a close thing, sending a car to Touma-sensei's house and bringing him here without being seen by the Improvement troops. Of course the Improvement Committee doesn't have the authority to question civilians or to search civilian vehicles, but if they had found us before we got to the base, I wouldn't have been surprised if they had exceeded their authority and kidnapped Touma-sensei by force...there wasn't even time to stop and explain the situation to him until we got here."

"I am deeply sorry for putting you through so much trouble." It was the first time Touma-sensei had spoken. He had a husky yet unexpectedly high voice.

"Don't trouble yourself about it. Our Law of Library Freedom exists for situations like this."

The only people who knew that Ogata's unenthusiastic response was a lie were Doujou's squad. There had never been a situation like this before, and it was obvious that even the Library Force, an organization that battled censorship on a daily basis, had never planned for one.

The words had been born only from the fact that they *would* need to apply the Law of Library Freedom to this case, and out of concern for Touma's feelings.

"Allow us to put you under our protection at this base. However, please understand that we may have to restrict your movements; you may not be able to live the life you are accustomed to." Ogata turned back to Orikuchi. "But we can't shelter a civilian in the Library Base indefinitely. It's not like Touma-sensei can register the base as his official residence. We'll hold a meeting to discuss a more fundamental solution to the problem later, and I'd welcome your opinion. Doujou!"

Doujou straightened and saluted.

"For the present, I am assigning your squad to Touma-sensei's bodyguard detail. I need to go inform Commander Hikoe of this development, so go ahead and start the meeting without me. Rearrange the Task Force's shifts as much as you see fit."

"Yes, sir." His tone was cool and nonchalant, but Iku privately thought he must be dancing on the inside. Doujou glared at her suspiciously.

"What the hell are you grinning at?"

"Nothing! Nothing at all!"

Even though the situation was anything but pleasant, the thought of Doujou being ordered to play bodyguard to his favorite author made her want to smile. Though, if Doujou had known what she was thinking, he probably would have given her an embarrassed clout on the head.

"This information hasn't gone beyond this squad and you, right?"

"Yes, sir, trust me," Shibasaki said, smiling self-assuredly.

"Nothing had been leaked to any of the other divisions."

"In that case," Doujou said, a little diffidently, "find rooms where Touma-sensei and Orikuchi-san can get some rest. They've had a busy day."

The commander's office wasn't soundproof; loud voices could be easily heard from outside. Iku understood that he also wanted Touma to leave because being around him made Doujou nervous, and wanted to smile again.

Sharp-eyed Shibasaki may have picked up on it too, for she grinned her best business grin and stood. "The visitors' room across from us should be free. Sensei, Orikuchi-san, if you'll follow me."

After Shibasaki led them out of the room, Doujou let out a long breath and slumped down in his seat. "I was so tense..."

"Doujou's been a fan of his for a long time." Komaki grinned and said teasingly, "But you better get used to him fast if you're going to be his bodyguard."

"I *know!* I was just surprised when he suddenly showed up on my doorstep!" Doujou snapped.

Iku giggled and rose. "I'm going to go make tea. Your throat is probably dry from nerves, huh?"

Doujou turned on Iku, unable to stomach her relaxed tone. "You told me you were a fan of his too! How are you so calm?"

"I told you, I read the books for the characters. I'm not that interested in the author. I was a little surprised at how ordinary he seemed, but that's it." Since Shibasaki would probably be back soon, she set out five teacups and began steeping the tea.

Shibasaki returned just as Iku was pouring the tea. The first thing out of her mouth was, "So, has Instructor Doujou calmed down yet?"

"Shut up!"

The whole group burst out laughing at Shibasaki's jibe at the transparent Doujou and Doujou's angry reaction.

Watching his bright red face, Iku decided that this made up for Doujou seeing her blush when he took her hand on the way back to the base.

But if there was anyone who calmed down quickly, it was Doujou. After he wet his throat with tea, he asked, "Who knows that the Library Base is sheltering Touma-sensei?"

The question was directed generally, but of course it was Shibasaki who answered it. Because she liked discussing information

like this, Komaki and Tedzuka seemed to stand back and let her answer; also, it sometimes happened that Shibasaki would pick up and present some surprising fact that she shouldn't have been able to get her hands on in such a short amount of time.

"Basically, the Library Task Force, Base Commander Hikoe, Special Advisor Inamine, and me. Commander Hikoe asked for Advisor Inamine's advice, and they decided not to tell the rest of the higher-ups."

"Alright. For the time being, we'll put Touma-sensei in a guest room at the dorm, under guard. His guard will be in the adjoining room on standby. The night watch will alternate between Komaki and Tedzuka, and Kasahara and me. Until Touma-sensei goes to sleep, members of other squads will take shifts guarding him."

*Whoa, it's like I getta sneak into the men's dorm at night!* Iku thought. But knowing that it wasn't the time to say it, she nodded silently along with the other two.

"So we're broadening our interpretation of the Law of Library Freedom to include protecting authors...but how are we actually going to resolve this problem?" Tedzuka asked.

Iku gazed at his profile, struck by a strange thought.

"...What?"

"No, nothing...I was just thinking, 'so there *are* things you don't know.'"

"Excuse me," Tedzuka snapped, "but do not try to drag me down to your level! The fact that I don't know how we're going to solve this just goes to show how hard a problem it is!"

"Shibasaki, do you know?" Iku took the opportunity to ask.

Shibasaki shrugged gently. "I have my guesses. Cars were sent out to fetch Commander Hikoe and Special Advisor Inamine, and they'll probably meet with Acting Commander Ogata to decide on our position."

"Oh, you lose, Tedzuka!"

"No one our age can compete with that woman when it comes to cunning. I'm not embarrassed to lose to someone no one can win against."

"I don't think you meant that as a compliment, but thank you for that wonderful compliment anyway."

Naturally, Shibasaki's "guess" aligned with their two superiors' opinions.

"Still, they'll need a legal expert. If they're not planning on telling the rest of the Library Force higher-ups, they won't be able to use the Library Force legal department. What will they do?" Doujou wondered.

Komaki answered. "They agreed to bring in Sesousha's legal department. They're heading here right now, and should arrive around the same time as Advisor Inamine."

"And what will their plan be?" Iku jumped in, knowing that if she didn't ask now she would lose her chance.

Doujou didn't answer with his usual clear-cut eloquence. He wrinkled his brow in thought as he spoke, "Article 21 of the constitution, paragraph 1...basically guarantees freedom of expression. All we can do is bring a lawsuit against the government saying that right has been violated--since it's not like we can go so far as to point out that the Media Improvement Act itself is in conflict with the rights granted to citizens by the constitution."

"That's probably what they'll do," Komaki nodded. He sighed and added, "Though it will take time to gather evidence." If they sued the Media Improvement Committee outright, there was no chance they would win. They needed to collect evidence that Touma-sensei was being watched or was in physical danger.

"For now, our duty is to watch over Touma-sensei. Once we're sure that his person is safe, we need to set a guard over his house as well."

Doujou said it matter-of-factly. The Media Improvement Committee was perfectly capable of kidnapping Touma's family to use as a bargaining chip.

"Komaki, draw up the shifts. Assign three squads to guard Touma-sensei, including ours."

"Okay, then I'll assign three more squads to watch his house. As soon as I've decided which squads, I'll send them over there."

"We'll put the rest of the squads around the perimeter of the dorm, under the guise of patrolling the base."

When this logical allocation had concluded, Shibasaki made an unorthodox suggestion.

"Well, then, pardon the liberty, but I'm going to start cutting now," Shibasaki said, grinning, to Touma. A full-length mirror was set up across from the sofa in the visitors' room where Touma sat, and vinyl covered every surface. It was as close to a barbershop as they could come.



Shibasaki applied her thinning scissors vigorously to Touma's hair, which was on the long side for a man of his age. It fell in dry tufts on the vinyl-covered floor.

"This was a great idea." Orikuchi watched in admiration as Shibasaki's hands worked.

"Our enemy will be using binoculars or other equipment to try and watch what's going on inside the base. That's why we can't let Touma-sensei take even one step outside the buildings. In that case I thought the safest thing would be to change his appearance."

Every member of the Improvement Special Agency had probably received Touma's picture by now. The disguise wouldn't fool them forever, but the longer they could make it last, the better.

"We also can't have rumors circulating around within the Library Force. Touma-sensei is famous, after all, and many librarians know what he looks like. Classified information, however well-concealed, has been leaked by oblivious rumor-mongers before. So on top of changing his appearance, it'll be safest to pretend that he's visiting from another branch of the Library Force for training. In any case, Touma-sensei stands out too much the way he looks now." As Shibasaki spoke, her scissors never ceased their lively snipping. There were many women who trimmed their own hair and bangs when they got long, but Shibasaki was especially skilled. In fact, Iku asked Shibasaki to cut her hair when she was too busy to go to the salon (and she did--for a fee, of course). "Your hair is a little bit long, sir, and it's a rather young style for someone nearing his sixtieth birthday. The contrast between that and your pure white hair makes you memorable. Speaking of which, Kasahara!"

Iku jumped at the sudden summons; she had been completely mesmerized by Shibasaki's hands.

Shibasaki handed her Touma's glasses, which she had taken before the haircut. "Go on a shopping trip with Instructor Doujou. Get glasses with the same prescription as these, but ask the person at the shop to pick out the frames they think would best suit an older man. They'll probably be watching everyone who enters and leaves the base, so buy an extra set of fashion glasses for you or Instructor Doujou. That way you'll just look like a lovey-dovey couple on a shopping date."

"Lovey-do--hey!!!"

"You were doing an excellent impression of a lovey-dovey couple when you came back to the base, so you should be fine. And you're still in civilian clothes, so it's a good allocation of resources."

"Oh, have Iku-chan and Doujou-kun started dating?" Orikuchi asked.

Iku exploded. "No, we haven't!"

Though she denied it, her red face made her true feelings obvious.

"It's at the point where they go out together on their day off and come back holding hands."

"Shibasakiiiiii!"

If Shibasaki hadn't been in the middle of cutting Touma's hair, Iku would have grabbed her. But Shibasaki blithely continued to issue orders.

"After that, go to the supermarket and get some hair dye. As black as you can find."

Iku didn't have the energy to even reply, and left the visitors' room.

"Is Shibasaki really cutting Touma-sensei's hair?" Doujou asked, a little plaintively, as soon as she returned to the office.

"Most of it is already gone by now. It's okay, she's good at cutting hair."

"It's the kind of good idea that takes a woman to come up with. Bravo to her." Komaki was inclined to praise Shibasaki's practicality, but Doujou seemed worried that Touma was unhappy.

"It's okay, it doesn't seem like he has much interest in his looks. When she made her proposal, about all he said was 'well, in that case, go ahead.' Anyway..." Iku said, suddenly much less articulate, "um, orders from Shibasaki. For me and Instructor Doujou to go shopping. Because we're still in civilian clothes and all."

She didn't say "because we'd look like a lovey-dovey couple and all," which was basically what Shibasaki had said.

"Shopping for what?" Doujou asked, bemused.

Iku showed him Touma's glasses. "Touma-sensei's getting new glasses along with his new haircut. She said to get the same strength for the lenses, but have the person at the store pick out the best frames for an older man. And that since we might be tailed, one of us should buy some fashion glasses too."

"Oh, that makes sense," Komaki said. "You're disguising yourselves as a couple on a normal shopping trip."

*Dammit, I wanted to steer as clear of that as possible!* Iku sent Komaki a baleful glare.

"After that, we need to go to a supermarket or something and buy hair dye, as dark as we can get."

"Got it. Let's go."

She had expected him to complain, but he rose without hesitation, and it took her a flustered moment to fall into step behind him.

When they walked out the gate of the base, there were indeed Improvement troops watching it, not even bothering to hide, creating a mood of unrest. Playing dumb and ignoring the surveillance, Doujou turned around and offered Iku his hand.

"Here."

"Huh...?"

"Like they said, the best disguise is looking like a couple. If you don't want to hold hands, at least take my arm or something."

"No, it's okay! I don't mind either one!" she replied bluntly, causing her face to heat and her head to snap down. Then timidly, she reached out and took Doujou's outstretched hand. Doujou grasped it tightly and thrust their clasped hands into his jacket pocket.

"I forgot my gloves," he said by way of excuse. She was too distracted to formulate a reply.

*...I wonder if this was Shibasaki's way of making up for cutting short our outing.* She decided that was the interpretation of Shibasaki's orders that she preferred, and pushed thoughts of the Improvement Special Agency into one small corner of her mind.

"Your hand is like a little kid's."

"Huh!? What do you mean by *that*!?"

"It's warm. It feels good when it's this cold out."

*That's because you're holding it, Instructor.* But the words couldn't have been pried from her mouth with a crowbar.

The "glasses for an older gentlemen" that were selected for them at the store had gold rims and tortoiseshell earpieces: stereotypical executive glasses. They carried an equally executive-level price, but Doujou paid with a credit card. Later he would submit it to Sesousha as a necessary expense.

Iku ended up being the one to buy fashion glasses. As she tried on likely-looking pairs, Doujou watched her and murmured, "Not so bad after all." Her heart soared in her chest, only to be brought down to earth by his too-honest followup, "They even make you look a little bit smart."

She gave him an earful for that comment, but from an outsider's perspective it probably sounded like playful lovers' banter.

Since they were here, after all, it would be a waste not to enjoy the perks the situation afforded her.

"Which do you think looks best? Maybe you should decide which one I get, Instructor Doujou." She meant it jokingly, but Doujou began to pick through the frames more carefully than she expected.

"...These looked good, didn't they?"

He handed her a pair of trim khaki-colored plastic frames. When she tried them on, they did indeed suit her features well.

*Even though I was trying pairs on willy-nilly, he was looking at them all with me,* she realized, and her expression grew soft.

"...Then I'll get them."

Since they didn't need prescription lenses, the price was fairly reasonable and they didn't take long to make. She was so pleased with her purchase that she had them take off the price tag so that she could wear them home.

Doujou offered to pay for them, but she turned him down. "No, now I actually want them, so I'll buy them myself. It's not often you tell me that something looks good on me," she smiled.

Doujou suddenly frowned and looked away. "...Sometimes..." he murmured to himself. She couldn't hear the end of his sentence and had no idea what he had been saying.

Doujou didn't seem to know what to do while they waited for Touma's glasses to be ready, so he wandered the shop aimlessly. Both Iku and Doujou had good vision, so if not for situations like this they would never have an excuse to visit an optician. Iku left her to her exploration, sitting down on the sofa and having fun looking at herself in the mirror as she put on and took off the glasses she had just bought.

"Er, does it usually take long to make a pair of glasses?" she heard Doujou ask an employee.

Apparently it would take close to an hour. The employee suggested that if he had other errands, that he should run them in the meantime.

"Thank you, I will," Doujou replied, and came over to Iku.  
"Sounds like it'll take a while, so let's go buy the--what was it, hair dye?"

"Sure," Iku said, standing up. She was still wearing her new glasses.

"Take those off," Doujou said, jerking his chin at them.

"Aw, why?"

"Those glasses are ostensibly the entire reason we came to this store. If you put them on now we lose our excuse to come back."

"Oh, right." She took off her glasses, hesitated for a moment, and then slipped them into her coat pocket. Her coat was filled with down, so they probably wouldn't get scratched.

When they left the store, they were indeed followed, though in a somewhat perfunctory way. Doujou took Iku's hand again and put it in his pocket. The sun had set early, and as they had set out at dusk it was already dark and chilly. It was cold to be holding hands bare-handed, so putting them in a pocket was the sensible thing to do.

*And that's the only reason,* she chided herself.

Iku rummaged around in her coat pocket.

"What are you doing?" Doujou asked.

She mumbled, "Nothing, it's just that my other hand is cold..."

"Still begs the question."

"I thought I'd move my glasses to my other pocket, the empty one on the side where we're holding hands. I don't want to get oil from my hand on the lenses, and since it's this dark out the people watching us won't be able to see what I'm doing, right? They just seem to be standing around in random places anyway." By the time she had finished explaining, she had moved her glasses to her other pocket.

Doujou had been waiting for Iku, and when she was done they set off again. They were headed for the large supermarket in front of the train station.

They casually tossed a box of hair dye marked with a black sticker into their basket, and for cover Iku bought shampoo and conditioner. It had been just about time for her to restock, anyway.

"Instructor, that really, really doesn't fit with the rest of the stuff we're buying."

"Shut up, it's a waste of money to buy them individually from the vending machine in the dorm. I'm just taking advantage of this opportunity," Doujou said, putting a six-pack of beer into their basket.

"You're gonna make it heavy, c'mon."

"I'm the one carrying it, so leave me alone!"

Under the name of "taking advantage of this opportunity," Doujou went to the gourmet section and picked up some smoked meats.

*Oh, I wonder if this is like the candy stash we have in our room,* Iku thought, catching a glimpse at life on the men's side of the dorm.

After he paid, Doujou looked at his watch. "Right, we should be getting back."

"Um, here's what I owe you for groceries--"

"It's just a few hundred yen, right? Don't worry about it, I don't like having a lot of change."

She suddenly burst out laughing.

"What?!"

"I guess there are a lot of men who don't like change? I just remembered that my father and my brothers are the same way."

Perhaps he didn't like being laughed at, for he wore a sullen expression as he explained, "A wallet that's too full wears out the fabric of our pants. You can't compare it to the bottomless pits that women call their wallets--you guys never go anywhere without carrying a purse or something."

"I guess that's true."

"I don't need money from you, but carry your own stuff--my hands are full with mine."

"I can see that--you did buy that beer, after all."

"Leave it alone."

Touma's glasses were ready when they returned to the shop. While Doujou paid, Iku waited on the sofa again. This time she was watching over their groceries.

"Done."

Since the glasses were expensive, the shop had thrown in a case for free. Doujou put Touma's new glasses in an inner pocket, and put his old ones in another pocket since his hands were too full to carry them.

"You can wear your glasses now."

"Oh! Right..."

*I wonder if I should buy a case for mine,* she thought as she pulled her unprotected glasses out of her pocket.

"Um, is it okay if I go buy a case for myself?"

"Save it for later."

Doujou no longer hesitated when he took her hand and put it in his pocket as they set out, Iku leaving the shop a little reluctantly.

They walked for a time, until it seemed Doujou couldn't take her morose expression anymore. He let go of her hand, reached into his shopping bag, and pulled out a glasses case, still in its packaging.

It was a lime green metal case, pretty and stylish.

"Here."

"What? But..."

"The colors matched so well I couldn't help myself. Does it work for you?"

Iku bobbed her head up and down. "Thank you so much! It makes me really happy...but why...?"

"Don't ask!"

Deflecting her question with an irrational bellow, Doujou grabbed Iku's hand again, and this time forgot to put it in his pocket as they started walking.

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"Wow, those make you look a little bit smar--"

"Shut up, I'm tired of hearing that!" she interrupted waspishly. Tedzuka, after Doujou, Shibasaki, and Orikuchi, was the fourth person to express that opinion.

"They suit you. Did you pick them yourself?" Of course Komaki was the only one who asked her a normal question.

"Um, well..." She only hesitated for a second, but that was enough time for Komaki to understand. He glanced at Doujou.

"He has a pretty solid aesthetic sense," Komaki whispered. "He chose well for you. You might not have bought them because you wanted to, but I think it'll be fun and stylish to wear them when you go out to enjoy yourself."

Iku's face grew red. She didn't dare tell him that Doujou had bought her a case as well.

"So Touma-sensei is getting his hair dyed right now?"

"Yes, in the showers. It'll take an hour for the dye to set, so Shibasaki told me to come bring a Force uniform and a tracksuit to change into in the meantime."

"Understood. Tedzuka, go find something appropriate," Komaki ordered, and Tedzuka left the office.

"What was the result of the meeting between the higher-ups and Sesousha's legal department?" Doujou asked Ogata, who had returned from the meeting.

"Mm, I'll explain when we've got everyone gathered together. It'll be faster if Touma-sensei and Orikuchi-san are present as well. And you can announce the guard shifts then."

"Understood."

The Task Force was ordered to convene at seven, when Touma would be ready, so Force members started to finish up their duties and trickle in. They made fun of Doujou and Iku, who were conspicuous in their casual clothes, but Doujou deflected them expressionlessly.

"How can you be so high-spirited when you all must know the situation Touma's in?" he said. Iku, also doing her best to dodge the teasing, heard him and cocked her head. The retort sounded like the result of the absent Genda's tutelage.

At length Orikuchi and Shibasaki appeared, leading Touma who was clad in a Library Force office uniform. His appearance was completely changed from the photograph in his books; he looked like a typical older businessman. His hair was neatly cut, and its dark color made him look younger.

Except for the squads sent to Touma's house, the entire Task Force was gathered.

Being it was the Library Force, most of them were readers, and they were all turned to watch Touma with burning interest.

Touma bowed his head to them. "I'm sorry for causing such a fuss."

And then he sat down in the very back of the room, where Orikuchi and Shibasaki had led him out of consideration for his feelings; he would probably be more relaxed if he wasn't the center of attention.

Ogata told them the upshot of the meeting between the Library Force higher-ups (meaning Hikoe and Inamine) and Sesousha's legal department. They would in fact be taking the Media Improvement Committee to trial over their violation of the right to free speech, and would be starting by gathering evidence.

"How will we gather evidence?" a Force member asked.

Ogata answered matter-of-factly. "Responsibly. For now, we'll use a camera with a telescopic lens from the base's roof to take pictures of the Improvement troops watching the base. Eventually we'll see one who's careless, and we'll capture him and make him talk."



The fact that none of them questioned whether this could be called "responsible" showed that the Library Task Force was the same even in Genda's absence.

"Next, Doujou will announce the shifts for Touma-sensei's bodyguard."

"Yes, sir."

Doujou laid out his plans, including the shifts for guarding Touma's house.

The meeting proceeded through its agenda without incident, and ended with the decision that the Task Force would see Orikuchi and Sesousha's legal team back to the Sesousha office.

"We can call a taxi. Wouldn't it be a bad idea to have it known that Sesousha and the Library Force were in contact right now?"

Orikuchi was trying to be cautious, but she was outside of her area of expertise so her assumptions were subtly mistaken.

Ogata quickly set her straight. "Our enemies aren't stupid enough to assume that Sesousha wouldn't come to the Library Force for help at a time like this. That's why they're watching the base so closely even though they haven't confirmed that we have Touma-sensei. They can still see that the Library Force and Sesousha are setting up to cooperate. Meaning it makes sense for us to take you back."

"Ah, I understand."

"In return, hide your faces when you get into and out of the car so they can't tell who's inside. Even the Improvement Special Agency can't seize random Sesousha employees and question them, so if you don't show your faces you should be safe. We'll take care of your transportation for subsequent meetings as well."

"I understand. In that case, we would be pleased to accept." Orikuchi said. As she was leaving, she told Touma, "Take care. Please."

\*

The Library Base's unmarried dorms were large, so none of the residents knew all of the others by sight. On top of that, both official and personal visitors of the Library Force often stayed in the dorms, so no one noticed one more unfamiliar face. Even moreso since Touma was wearing a Library Force uniform. Ogata was accompanying him, pointing out the facilities, so it would be very natural to think that he was a visiting commander from another branch. And since the dorm

residents were mostly young people, there was little chance of them striking up a conversation with an unfamiliar older commander.

"Looks like Shibasaki's plan was a success, for now," Doujou reported at their pre-bedtime meeting in the mixed section of the dorm.

"Right? His whole image is totally different from the picture in his books. I think he'll go safely unrecognized for a while." Shibasaki was triumphant.

That was when Ogata poked his head in. "Oh, you're all here."

"How is Touma-sensei?"

"Understandably tired--he said he was going to turn in early. I showed him the guest room and asked him not to lock the door. I'll leave the rest up to his bodyguard." As he spoke, Ogata lowered his backside onto the table. It was a habit of his; unlike Genda, he was quite tall, so desks and tables were at a better level for resting on than chairs.

Watching him, with his height and habits so different from Genda's, Iku couldn't help wishing he were here. It wasn't that Ogata wasn't reliable. But Genda was their bastion in times of trouble, and his absence during this crisis was stressful for all of them--even Acting Commander Ogata.

"Doujou, your squad has the night shift, don't they? I'll be counting on you."

"We'll get the job done," Doujou answered steadily. His calm voice relieved Iku's anxiety a little. She was finally included in that "we"; she would not hold the squad back.

"Shibasaki, how long do you think we can keep him here without his identity being discovered?"

"Hmmm...maybe a week?" She was as humble giving this estimate as she had been proud before.

Ogata nodded. "All right. Then we'll have to come up with a preemptive strike fast. Doujou, will three days be enough?"

"Yes, sir."

At Doujou's answer, everyone's expressions grew tense.

It took five days, not three, until something happened.

\*

That night, at two in the morning when even the night owls among the Library Force were going to bed--

The door to Touma's room, which was unlocked in case the guard stationed next door needed to enter quickly, opened soundlessly.

Into the tatami-floored room, which was empty except for some furniture, a futon, and Touma's luggage, crept two Library Force members.

"Touma-sensei," a voice whispered in the darkness.

In response, a figure sat up from the futon.

The voice whispered again. "The situation has changed. I'm sorry to disturb you in the middle of the night, but you need to accompany us."

"I understand," Touma whispered back. "Could you give me a hand up? My back is a little..."

One of the Force members crossed the tatami and reached for Touma's outstretched hand--and grabbed it.

*Bam!* The floor reverberated.

The Force member who had tried to pull Touma up had ended up on the tatami instead, with his arm twisted up behind him. The other tried to flee at once, but he was knocked down with one punch from the side.

The Force member who had knocked him down sat on him. At that moment the lights went on with a *click*. The glaring light banished the darkness from the room.

Standing beside the light switch was Shibasaki. Komaki was in Touma's futon, and Tedzuka was sitting on the Force member who had tried to run, a hand twisted in his collar keeping him still.

"We would just *love* to hear how exactly the situation has changed." Shibasaki leaned against the wall and looked down at the prisoners. Naturally, they were not with the Task Force. The dorm was too large for one person to know everyone in it, but--"You two are librarians, correct?" Apparently such a feat was not beyond Shibasaki. "Upon whose orders were you acting?"

The two librarians didn't speak.

"Then we don't have a choice. Take their badges."

Shibasaki's command was the first thing that got a reaction out of the librarians, and they struggled, but they were well-restrained by Komaki and Tedzuka and could barely move at all.

Their Library Force badges were quickly confiscated and tossed to Shibasaki. She flipped them open to reveal photo IDs, and

photographed them one at a time with the digital camera she had taken from her pocket.

"Commander Hikoe will be keeping your badges for the time being. And you might want to get ready for your inevitable inquest. If only you had told us who you were working for in the first place..."

The librarians looked confused. Shibasaki's smile was dazzling, at least on the surface.

"The only one who's been told that the Library Base is harboring Touma-sensei, aside from the ones who were told at the beginning, is Director Etou. Two days ago, Commander Hikoe pretended to send out a memo to the higher-ups informing them of Touma-sensei's presence, but it was actually bait for Director Etou. Since then you've been watching, learning our shift changes and when we take Touma-sensei out, right? And though he keeps it a secret, Director Etou is one of the leaders of the Library of Tomorrow Project. This certainly proves that the Library of Tomorrow Project is on the side of the Improvement Committee."

The moment the name of the Library of Tomorrow Project was mentioned, the Force member that Tedzuka was sitting on went berserk. "How dare you make such a cowardly attack! Just because you're too feeble-minded to understand President Tedzuka's ideas!"

Tedzuka's shoulders jerked up. In an effort to control himself, he gripped the librarian's collar tighter and tighter.

Then the librarian made a dire mistake. "And Tedzuka! You're Tedzuka-san's brother, for God's sake! Why don't you even try to appreciate his ideals!?" He continued to dig himself deeper. "If I had the good fortune to be blessed with a brother like that..."

"SHUT UP!"

Tedzuka let go of his collar and punched him in the face.

"Good fortune!? Do you know all the things he's wrecked for me and my family? Do you? How dare you speak of the ideals of a man who spurned and wounded and destroyed those closest to him and never once looked back!"

Tedzuka's fist struck his face a second, then a third time.

"I will never 'appreciate' the ideals of someone who would trample all over his own family and never even think twice about it! You two are just idiots he's making dance to his own self-aggrandizing tune! Just you wait and see, he'll wash his hands of you now! All while talking about how noble you are to sacrifice yourself for his ideals, of course!"

The librarian's cheeks were swollen and his nose was gushing blood; he was no longer in any shape to make a retort. Tedzuka grabbed one side of his collar and levered him up.

"I'm sorry I have to do this, I'll pop it back in in just a moment," Komaki said to the librarian he was holding down, and then dislocated his shoulder like he was popping out a doll's arm. The librarian screamed, and then lay down limply on the tatami.

Having incapacitated his own prisoner, Komaki walked over to Tedzuka, and grabbed his wrist when he raised his fist to deliver another blow.

"Tedxuka, enough. You're fighting with a noncombatant."

At last, Tedzuka lowered his hand, breathing hard. His temper still wasn't under control; his hands were still balled into white-knuckled fists.

"Shibasaki-san, call Commander Ogata," Komaki ordered. "He and I will process the prisoners."

Shibasaki nodded and had a short conversation on her cell phone; it ended without mentioning Tedzuka.

"Sorry to leave you waiting," Komaki said as he walked back to his prisoner. Komaki made him scream a second time, but the shoulder that had been dangling appeared to be back in its proper place.

Ogata arrived before long, and he picked up Tedzuka's prisoner and left with Komaki. The prisoner's still-bleeding nose must have told him most of what had happened, for he didn't ask. Inamine had probably told Ogata about Tedzuka's family connections when he was appointed as Acting Commander.

"Well, we better let Touma-sensei's security detail know what happened," Shibasaki said lightly as if nothing were amiss, and pulled out her cell phone again.

\*

The phone's vibration echoed loudly in the dark room, and Doujou answered.

"Ah, so they tried that room after all. Good thing we had Touma-sensei change rooms."

Iku, listening closely nearby, managed to get the gist of what had happened. Their trap had worked beautifully to capture their prey.

After a short conversation, Doujou hung up, and Iku spoke to him in a low voice. It was late at night, and Touma was sleeping deeply in the next room.

"Well?"

"We caught a couple of rats in the other room. Good thing we moved Touma-sensei to the women's side...though it did put more of a burden on you."

Besides the Improvement Special Agency, there was one other organization that Touma's security detail had to watch out for: the Library of Tomorrow Project, which was headed up by Tedzuka's older brother Satoshi. Since some in the group didn't reveal their membership to the outside world, they didn't know which parts of the Library Force it might have wormed its way into, so figuring out how to guard Touma had been a thorny problem.

That was why they couldn't tell anyone that Touma was being harbored in the Library Base except the bare minimum of personnel. The fact that in such a dire situation, only Hikoe, Inamine, the Library Task Force, and Shibasaki knew what was going on was unprecedented. In normal cases, all the higher-ups would have been at the meeting, and even if Sesousha's legal department had been there, the Library Force's would have been too.

Furthermore, even among the Task Force, the only ones who knew the truth about the Library of Tomorrow Project were Doujou's squad and Ogata. There was reason to be cautious about the special nature of Tedzuka's family connections. The bonds of trust between members of the Library Task Force were strong on the whole, but with the situation being what it was, if anything happened it would likely put Tedzuka in a delicate position.

"Nah, if I had a burden it was a pretty small one...all I had to do was keep watch here alone until lights-out. Sneaking into the girls' dorm after curfew must have required much more courage, Instructor."

"Shut up."

A plan had been formulated to lay a trap at the men's dorm while protecting Touma in the women's dorm, to be carried out by Doujou's squad during the late-night shift. This plan had called for one man to join Iku in guarding Touma, and Doujou had been the inevitable choice due to his height. However dim the lights in the dorm at night, if Komaki or Tedzuka had run into anyone, their height would have caused them to be challenged immediately. It was a different matter

with Touma--he had entered the women's dorm openly, pretending to be a higher-up doing an inspection.

"So, does this mean we've caught the Library of Tomorrow Project red-handed?"

"Well, it sounds like we're thinking of ways to make sure they *stay* caught." It was most troubling that there were those among their allies who were passing information to their enemies. "In any case, this incident will tell the Library of Tomorrow Project beyond a doubt that the Library Force is harboring Touma-sensei. The key is whether or not they'll tell the Improvement Committee."

"What will happen if they tell them?" Iku asked timidly.

"The Library of Tomorrow Project will show their hand to the whole Library Force, and they'll be treated like a kind of cult, which will put pressure on them. Plus it'll give us another piece of evidence for Touma-sensei's trial--that a Library Force organization in communication with the Media Improvement Committee tried to help kidnap Touma-sensei."

It took Iku a while before she could reply.

"...That would be awful for Tedzuka."

"For President Tedzuka of the Library Association, too."

Iku bit her lip against the tears that threatened to spill over, despite the fact that she wasn't personally involved. *Tedzuka's the one who's got to be hurting the most; don't cry like it's you.*

"I hate Tedzuka's brother."

Doujou was probably bewildered by this abrupt confession. But talking was the only way Iku could keep herself from crying right now.

"I feel so sorry for Tedzuka. No matter how many times his brother has betrayed him, Tedzuka can't bring himself to hate him. And his brother takes advantage of that to betray him over and over again. During my inquest--"

And she told him about how Satoshi had tried to get her to tell Tedzuka that if he wanted to save her, he would have to bend to Satoshi's will. It was the first time she had told anyone about their conversation, and Doujou took some time to absorb it before replying.

"You didn't say it. From Tedzuka's perspective, that betrayal never happened."

"That's just one betrayal."

"Even just one less betrayal makes his burden that much lighter. That's not meaningless."

*But it's still just one betrayal. Who knows how many times Tedzuka has been hurt in the past, and how many times he'll be hurt in the future?*

But Doujou said, "As Tedzuka's commanding officer, allow me to offer my gratitude. Thank you. For taking on that burden."

"...Is it okay if I go ahead and cry from shock at being praised by the demon instructor?"

She had a feeling it might be more acceptable to cry for herself rather than out of sympathy for Tedzuka.

"Yeah. Cry and savor the praise while you can." Doujou's voice was brusque, as though he knew the real reason she wanted to cry.

She wept softly, so very softly, so that he wouldn't detect any sadness in her quiet sobs.

\*

"Apparently Touma-sensei is safe. Looks like this gambit was worth it," Shibasaki said, folding her cell phone closed. She began to turn around, and Tedzuka, who was sitting cross-legged on the floor, quickly shifted so that his back was to her.

"Don't look at me!"

He knew his eyes were hot with tears. Shibasaki, for whom crying in front of others was the ultimate humiliation, ought to understand the delicacy of the situation.

"Please, let me be alone."

But Shibasaki didn't leave; instead, she walked around to stand in front of Tedzuka. Since he was looking down at the floor, all he could see was her legs, elegant even in track pants; they were set in an imposing stance.

"That's hardly fair. After all, you made *me* cry once. I sense a double standard."

He knew she was talking about the time he had reproached her for keeping quiet about the fact that Inamine would be forced to resign. He was taken aback, though; he never thought he would hear Shibasaki admit that she had been crying.

His head snapped up to look at her, just as Shibasaki sank to her knees on the floor.

And then.

Tedzuka's eyes went wide. He didn't understand what had happened--



--until he no longer felt the pressure of soft lips against his own.

"Wha--...Why...?" He couldn't continue. The blood rose in his cheeks, and he didn't want her to see his flushed face but he couldn't take his eyes off of Shibasaki.

Shibasaki cocked her head nonchalantly. "Hm, shock therapy? Something like that, anyway."

"What the hell, am I some sort of princess with the vapors!? Are you supposed to be some kind of prince!?"

"Well, joking aside..."

"Joking...you did this as a joke...!?"

"You sound like Kasahara. Come on, you're a big boy, aren't you?"

He had no way to respond to that, and fell silent. Shibasaki continued to speak, still talking as if nothing out of the ordinary had happened.

"Well, be grateful. This is the first time in my life I've felt like doing something like this myself, so it's a rare opportunity."

"What's that supposed to--"

"To put it simply," Shibasaki said, and suddenly there was no trace of humor in her voice, "I thought it might not be bad to do this kind of thing once in a while with a man who actually mattered to me."

*What? What on earth does that--*

"If you found it unpleasant, I'm sorry, it was wrong. We'll say the temptation was just a little too much for me."

*The temptation!? During such a complicated time, in such a complicated atmosphere!? Anyway, is that something you ever say to a man!?* Tedzuka's shoulders slumped.

"...No...I didn't really find it...it's not like you don't matter to--"

"Okay, let's leave it at that. Anyway, now that I've given you this rare chance as collateral, I've got a favor to ask."

*And now she's adding terms and condition!? Right, that's the kind of woman she is.*

"What?" he replied, a little sulkily. As the woman had said, this was an extremely rare case; his right to veto her favor might as well have been taken from him.

"Exchange cell phones with me. All the contact information required to do our jobs should be in both our phones."

For a moment, Tedzuka didn't understand the purpose behind her proposal, but then it registered. He realized the significance of exchanging phones.

Shibasaki watched his expression change, and grinned. "I love the way that you, unlike Kasahara, are quick on the uptake."

A number that was in Tedzuka's phone but not in Shibasaki's.

And what it meant that she wanted Tedzuka's phone.

"Are you...planning to have it out with my brother?"

It wouldn't be enough to just tell Shibasaki Satoshi's phone number. Satoshi was undoubtedly strict about whom he talked to, and it was implausible that he would answer a call from an unknown number. Even if, for example, it was Inamine or Hikoe calling, he probably wouldn't answer a sudden phone call unless they had provided some forewarning by giving him their numbers first.

Tedzuka's phone was the only sure route to Satoshi. And if he got a call from Tedzuka's number, Satoshi would have no way of deciding whether it was Tedzuka, or someone borrowing Tedzuka's phone.

"It'll be the kind of bout people would pay to see, don't you think?"

Her cocky smile grated on his nerves.

"...All right. However--" Tedzuka's arms came around her slender form, hard. "Your collateral was insufficient."

*Don't think you can just kiss me and disappear.*

Holding the tense Shibasaki tightly so she couldn't escape, Tedzuka kissed her deeply.

\*

The ringtone he had assigned to his little brother sounded in the middle of the night. Tedzuka Satoshi picked up without a thought.

"What is it? Did you come up with something you wanted to say to me?"

Thanks to Etou's report, he had been told that the Library Force was sheltering Touma. As he asked the question, he wondered if it had indeed been a trap.

Satoshi had ordered Etou not to make a move. But if he had done something anyway, of course the Task Force would have been the ones to stop it, and his little brother wouldn't be able to resist calling to give Satoshi a piece of his mind.

But the voice that responded wasn't his brother's.

"Nice to meet you! I'm one of Tedzuka-kun's friends!"

It was a young woman's, dripping with manufactured levity.

"...Who exactly might you be?" he asked in an even tone, forcing down his momentary shock.

The challenger dropped another bombshell. "Mm, the kind of friend who can give Tedzuka-kun a kiss as collateral for his cell phone?"

On the other end, he could hear his brother cry out, "*Shut up, why are you telling him that!?*" so it was apparently true.

"Ah, you must be Shibasaki Asako-san?"

There were only two female Force members who were close to his brother. Satoshi had met Kasahara Iku, in which case this voice belonged to Shibasaki Asako, by process of elimination.

Now was his chance to settle the question of whether she was an intelligence department cadet once and for all.

"My, my. I'm honored that Tedzuka Satoshi-san of the Library of Tomorrow Project, known far and wide for his keen intelligence, knows my name!"

"And I'm honored by the attention of the Library Force's experimental intelligence department. Tell me, has it been brought under Commander Hikoe's leadership, or is Special Advisor Inamine still in charge?"

"What a fascinating question! I'll leave it to your imagination."

She was the polar opposite of Kasahara Iku. And she was also the polar opposite of his too-serious brother, who always played right into Satoshi's hand.

"If we continue to play these little word games we won't get anywhere, so I'm going to cut to the chase. The only member of the Library Force brass who knew that the Library Base was sheltering Touma Kurato-sensei was Director Etou. This evening, two Force members tried to make off with Touma-sensei. They have already confessed that they were acting on Director Etou's orders, and that they are members of the Library of Tomorrow Project. Commander Hikoe has decided to open two separate inquests against Director Etou and the two librarians. According to Kasahara, who has some experience in this area, a governmentalist inquest really shakes one to the core."

There was a smooth hint of poison in this last sentence, chiding him for the time the Library of Tomorrow Project framed Kasahara Iku.

"If you use your imagination, I'm sure you'll understand what they'll say about the Library of Tomorrow Project the minute they cut deals with the inquisitors."

"Will you announce to the public that a cult-like organization has taken root in the Library Force? I worry what that will do to the public's estimation of the Force."

"*We're* more worried about the total loss of faith our Library Force would suffer if we covered it up and it was later discovered," she said impishly, expressing an unshakeable conviction that his worry was unwelcome and misplaced. "Will you disassociate yourself from those two librarians? Though, if you disassociate yourself from Director Etou, you might cause a commotion among the members of the Library of Tomorrow Project. 'If Tedzuka Satoshi would cut off even such a high-ranking member...'"

"You must be excellent at *shougi* problems. You're very good at reading ahead."

He had predicted the possibility that an intelligence department cadet might infiltrate the Library of Tomorrow Project as a rank-and-file member. It would be impossible to see the whole picture from the position of an ordinary member, but they would glimpse a piece of it.

And it looked like the Library Force was prepared to use that one piece to shake the Project as much as they could.

"And I know that the Library of Tomorrow Project probably wanted to use Touma-sensei as a bargaining chip, so that when Library Force was brought under the Ministry of Culture as a federal organization, we wouldn't have to 'bow down' quite so low, but..."

*"When the Library Force becomes a federal organization, we'll probably have to bow down to the Improvement Committee, but I'd like to make that bow be as shallow as possible."* He remembered using this logic; if he wasn't mistaken, it was something he had told his brother. So. His brother relied on this woman's judgement often enough to bring that straight to her. This conclusion irritated him.

"Whether or not the Kantou Library Force, or the Library Force nationwide, will go along with this plan is a different kettle of fish. I would be honored if you told me how you propose to overcome that particular difficulty. It's not the kind of plan that even the governmentalsists will accept without question."

"That," he said, in as jovial a tone as he could manage, "is none of your concern."

As if her request had been rhetorical, she went on, with ostentatious politeness. "All right. If we get into organizational theory, we'll just go around in circles due to our different positions and perspectives. So shall we try getting down to the root of the problem?"

Just what hand was Shibasaki planning to play? The fact that he hadn't been able to ignore her and hang up forced Satoshi to admit that he too had fallen under her spell.

"What do you think about censorship?"

"It is an act that must be eradicated," Satoshi said without a moment's hesitation. "There's no such thing as 'righteous' censorship in this world. Censorship always reflects the arbitrary biases of the politicians who put it in place. No matter how harmful a book is, citizens have the right to look at it and judge it for themselves. Of course, if that book causes harm to a group of citizens, then we should be careful about treating it as protected speech, but the decision about how to address a group's grievances should be made by following due process of law."

"I think we can agree on all of that so far. Next question. Is there any justice in the Media Improvement Committee? As they exist at this moment, behaving as if though they are righteous?"

"Are you kidding me? Of course not," Satoshi nearly snorted. There was no such thing as just censorship in the first place, and however they dressed it up, the Improvement Committee, as an organization that touted censorship, could never be just. "That's why the Improvement Act had to be passed behind the backs of the citizenry. If it had been thoroughly discussed and those discussions had been disclosed to the nation, it never would have had a hope of passing. At most, they're just clad in borrowed garments of justice, stolen from under the nose of the citizenry."

"I agree wholeheartedly. But I also believe one more thing."

Shibasaki paused, as if to heighten his anticipation.

"The reason the Media Improvement Committee has been able to maintain a veneer of justice is because its existence benefits the government. And not just the government--a whole slew of other people greedily reap the benefits of censorship, and that's why they can keep their pretense of justice. And I believe the Committee themselves enjoy some of that profit. That's why they can't tolerate criticism, and they can't tolerate the Library Force. Am I wrong?"

"...Allow me to express my respect for your bravery in declaring that belief."

He was truly astonished, and at a loss for words.

"They were given a 'just-ish' role for the benefit of the government and others who profit from censorship, and they make it their duty to protect their position. They act as a proxy organization

for the country's behind-the-scenes leaders, and sometimes they are granted the role of aiding the weak, so they can have a certain amount of confidence in naming themselves just. However--"

By this time Satoshi was rallying. He wasn't going to let himself be outdone by a little girl. "But the fact that the Library Force battles against the Media Improvement Committee doesn't make the Library Force just either. Do you understand that?"

"Of course. I mean, the Library Force took up arms in the name of fighting censorship."

Shibasaki Asako had taken the words right out of Satoshi's mouth.

"Even though none of us was the force behind the decision, the Library Force chose the path of hurting or killing people for the sake of fighting censorship. The moment they made that choice, they lost their chance to be champions of justice. But neither can we throw our weapons down, now. If we did, we would be slaughtered."

"...You're a smart girl. The smartest person I've ever had the chance to talk to personally."

It was Satoshi's highest compliment, but all Shibasaki said was a breezy "Thanks." She was probably used to being complimented on her acuity.

"Two organizations, neither of them just, scrambling after the appearance of justice like soccer players after a ball. It must look like quite a sorry spectacle from on high. Neither the Improvement Committee nor the Library Force ever had the potential to be anything but misguided. That's been true ever since the Media Improvement Act was passed. Since the game board has been warped from the beginning, there can never be any such thing as a righteous piece."

Unlike Kasahara Iku, who had overturned his entire logical argument based on her own feelings, Shibasaki Asako, while fully acknowledging the inconsistencies in the organization she herself belonged to, still rejected Satoshi's ideas.

*So this is the woman you've chosen? I suppose she suits you, at that,* Satoshi whispered to his brother inside his head.

"So, it looks like we more or less agree on the fundamentals?" Shibasaki asked.

"Yes," Satoshi confirmed.

"Then I'm going to make a proposal. I once heard from a certain person that there's a faction within the government that is opposed to censorship?"

He didn't even have to think about it before he realized she was talking about Asahina. According to Asahina's report, he had never obtained conclusive evidence that Shibasaki was a member of the intelligence department, but that had probably been a lie. Had he fallen under Shibasaki's spell too?

"There's a possibility that the Library of Tomorrow Project could enter the government without having to bow down at all--if we treat the special counter-terrorism bill and the situation with Touma-sensei as a golden opportunity."

"Ah--I get it, I get it."

Using the current situation as a once-in-a-lifetime chance, he could lean on the groups that opposed censorship in every ministry and political party and bring them together, creating one big anti-Media Improvement Act faction within the government.

The Library of Tomorrow Project already had ties to the faction within the Ministry of Justice that opposed censorship. There was a possibility that the Project could be brought in to the Ministry as a censorship advisory group, and from there, in the current climate of confusion, enter the central government.

The reason he hadn't chosen to do so, and instead had chosen to watch and wait, was because he was following a long-term plan of seeking only the most stable footholds, even if they were small. He had explained to his underlings that this was the most solid strategy. Even Etou's actions today had been for the aim of creating a foothold for the Library of Tomorrow Project, cutting a deal with the Ministry of Justice using Touma as a bargaining chip.

Of course, it had been a brazen, inane plan, but Satoshi couldn't throw too many stones.

In the end, Satoshi was getting cold feet over the huge, short-term plan that Shibasaki Asako was on the verge of tempting him into. He was no different from Etou, who had tried to act so logically. Satoshi smiled bitterly at the realization.

"If the Library of Tomorrow Project gets on board with this proposal, your interests and the interests of the Library Force will align, and the Library Force will be able to back you up."

So this was the line they could compromise on--the Library Force itself wouldn't become a federal organization, but a part of it would be detached and transplanted into the central government.

"So the Library Force will remain a local organization, a practical organization, and the Library of Tomorrow project will join the fight

over censorship within the government as one more group opposed to censorship, unconnected to the day-to-day management of the Library Force?"

"Of course, we'll disregard what Director Etou and the two librarians did and let them go. And we won't publicize the Library of Tomorrow Project's cult-like status in the Library Force. --I think this is an historic opportunity to eradicate censorship, don't you?" Shibasaki pressed.

Satoshi smiled a strained smile and asked, "What would you do in my position?"

"Obviously I would jump at it. My name would go down in history. I wish we *could* change positions, that's how convinced I am," Shibasaki said earnestly. Her reply was so immediate it was intimidating. *This woman has that much confidence in herself?*

His emotions were rising toward the point of no return--"Also," Shibasaki added, "your little brother thinks you can do it."

Again a voice rose in reproach on the other end. "*Aw, come on! You think so, do you?*" Satoshi's expression abruptly softened.

"Would you put Hikaru on the phone?"

"Sure thing." Shibasaki replied without hesitation, but several moments of heated discussion followed on the other end. At length--

"...It's me." Finally his brother picked up the phone. His tone was more sullen than Satoshi had ever heard him.

"You think I can do this?"

"That's not how I'd put it!" his brother snapped, as if he were prepared for the question. "More like, if you *can't* do it after tearing our family apart and acting like the world revolves around you, you're nothing but a smooth-talking blowhard! What was the point of all your bragging, if you can't do something Shibasaki can do!? So if you *can't* do it, you better go crawling to our parents and beg them to accept your apology!"

"If I go along with her proposal, will you forgive me?"

"Only if you succeed! Gimme a break!"

His brother's censure was ruthless. It wouldn't be enough to try, he would have to succeed to be forgiven--but Satoshi knew it was probably his fault that his brother's feelings were so implacable.

"I understand. Put her back on."

This time, the transition was smooth.

"Well? What do you think?"

"Let's do it. Please have Etou and the two others released."



"First, please send an official Library of Tomorrow Project statement to Commander Hikoe pledging your cooperation with the terms of this proposal. They won't be released until it arrives. You have a week; after that we'll open inquests against them, starting with Director Etou. --No offense, but considering our history, we just don't regard a verbal promise from you as binding."

Her airtight negotiation style had probably been learned from Inamine.

"I understand. I'll do it."

"Thank you for your understanding."

Satoshi hung up, feeling strangely at peace.

\*

"For the time being, I'd like to keep your ph--"

As she closed Tedzuka's phone, Shibasaki's words were abruptly cut off.

Neither of them spoke for a while, and then finally Shibasaki opened her mouth.

"What was that? More collateral?"

"That's more than enough out of you!" Tedzuka said in his surliest voice.

Shibasaki couldn't help laughing.

## Chapter 2, Force an About-Face

\*

Tedzuka Satoshi's written pledge was sent around by special delivery two days after the Library of Tomorrow Project's blunder.

Within the Library Force, it was time to start discussing where Touma's next hideout should be. However much his appearance had changed, it wasn't as though they had gone as far as plastic surgery-- and after all, the Library Base had a high concentration of people who were very familiar with books and their authors. The story that he had come from another base for training was reaching the end of its credibility. A large scale personnel exchange was one thing, but one man staying more than ten days for training would draw attention, whether they liked it or not. Right now Touma was as invisible as air, but the longer he stayed, the more likely it was that Force members would notice something suspicious.

And so the next location chosen for his hideout—

"What a pleasant garden."

Touma sat at a table on the porch and gazed at the garden, which was bathed in morning light. Unlike a regular porch it was on the same level as the garden, a more accessible design.

The garden was Western in style, and mainly used *camomille* for its ground cover.

Sitting across from Touma in his wheelchair, Inamine gave a slightly embarrassed laugh. "It was a hobby of my late wife's... These days I can't tend it all myself, so I have people come in to look after it."

"If you're ever shorthanded, call me, I'd be glad to help," Iku said as she passed cups of tea to the two of them.

Doujou, who was sitting on the sofa in the living room adjoining the porch, wasted no time in retorting, "If you don't want that magnificent garden to fall into ruin, don't let her touch it."

"Hey, come on! I may not have a visibly green thumb or anything, but all four of my grandparents *were* farmers!"

"I believe that the skill set for farmers and the skill set for gardeners is somewhat different. Are you going to turn this beautiful garden into a potato field or something?"

*What the hell, until just a little bit ago you didn't even know the word 'gardening,'* Iku thought sourly. Doujou had gotten weirdly knowledgeable about horticulture only after Iku had introduced him to *camomille* in person. But since Doujou could surpass Iku's knowledge in a heartbeat if he actually became passionate about the topic, Iku didn't say anything.

The location chosen for Touma's hideout was Inamine's home in Hino. Inamine was reporting to the base every day for his job as special advisor, and since he lived alone, his house was almost totally unwatched by the Improvement Special Agency. Tedzuka Satoshi, perhaps hoping to raise their level of confidence about the location, told them that since Inamine worked at the base during the day and the only other person going into his house was his housekeeper, it was unthinkable that he would leave his bodyguards at home, so he was only watched as he entered and left the Library Base.

Touma had slipped into Inamine's car and moved to his home in the second week after he had taken refuge at the Library Base. For good measure, a Task Force member with the same build as Touma had donned a white wig and walked around the administrative building, as a distraction for the Improvement troops who were watching, while Inamine's tinted-windowed car departed.

Doujou and Iku also headed to Inamine's house via the Chuuou Line. That evening Komaki and Tedzuka went home with Inamine posing as his driver and his assistant, and took over Doujou and Iku's bodyguard duties. The two groups continued to switch places in this fashion every day.

During the day, there wasn't much to their bodyguarding; all they did was spend time with Touma in Inamine's house.

"Shouldn't we be patrolling outside?" Iku murmured, worried.

Inamine answered, "No, it's fine. This house has a state-of-the-art security system."

"If there were patrols around a house that already had a security system, it would just look suspicious and give rise to rumors that something was hidden in the house. And if the rumors came to the attention of the police, all would be lost."

Inamine's house, which he had remodeled into a one-story bungalow after losing his leg, had a living room, bedroom, guest room, dining room, home office--and as expected of the former Library Base commander, current special advisor, a room that served as a library.

Touma slept in the guest room on the guest futon, and one of the male bodyguards slept in Touma's room in a sleeping bag. The other slept in a sleeping bag in the living room. (Naturally, Iku was always in the living room.)

Meals were made by Inamine's live-out housekeeper. She cooked for Touma and Inamine in the evening; Touma, Inamine, and the two bodyguards in the morning; and Touma and the bodyguards at lunchtime. The bodyguards ate dinner at the Library Base before they headed out and after they came back, so they only needed breakfast and lunch. They also, of course, did their laundry back at the base.

The housekeeper was a fifty-something woman called Fuku-san, apparently some relative of Inamine's. That had been the extent of the introduction, so Doujou's squad all just called her Fuku-san.

Inamine must have told her something of the situation, for she didn't bat an eye at the sudden influx of visitors to the Inamine household, just delighted in the fact that there was young, free labor waiting for her orders every day.

Out of Doujou and Iku, she especially valued Iku for her ability to clean high places. As for Doujou, he was often given tasks that involved scrubbing, bending over, or manual labor.

"It's not easy for me to reach high places, you know. I'm so glad you're here to help me out, Iku dearie."

She was apparently taking this opportunity to have the ceilings cleaned; Komaki and Tedzuka were also made to dust them every time. The cleaning started after Inamine left for the day.

*"It's so lovely to be tall, It's so lovely to be tall,"* Fuku-san kept repeating, apparently trying to flatter Iku, until she couldn't help but be concerned for her short, ceaselessly scrubbing superior.

"Um...if the ceilings are impossible to clean without a stepladder or something, you could borrow one from someone...couldn't you?"

"Well, maybe, but a tall girl like you--"

"Er, but being tall as a girl can give us height complexes and stuff like that, so I might be happier if you didn't mention it quite so often."

"But you look like a model and you have good taste in clothes--I don't think you have anything to worry about, dear."

*Bah, it's no good, she's one of those older ladies who doesn't listen to a word other people say.* Iku wanted to drop her head into her hands.

"Um, I'll do the hallway, so you can go wherever you were going to clean next, Fuku-san."

"Are you sure? Well, thank you."

Just then, the timer on the washing machine went off, and Fuku-san dashed off to attend to it.

"...You don't have to worry so much about my feelings getting hurt."

"What? I'm not!"

"You obviously are! Did you think you were doing a good job hiding it?!" Doujou barked, wringing his rag in the bucket of water. The dorm was cleaned from top to bottom every day, so all of Library Force members were skilled at all kind of cleaning, regardless of sex. "The fact that I'm short is an objective truth. I don't need sympathy from my subordinates. Besides, you were the one who was always calling me 'midget' when you first enlisted."

"That was--" Her face grew red with embarrassment as she remembered the days when she used to thoughtlessly snarl at Doujou at every opportunity. "...I'm sorry. It was just the incoherent yapping of an idiot. Since then, I've thought about what I did. I just didn't have anyone to take my feelings out on, so I took them out on you... Five centimeters really isn't that big a difference."

"Yes, it is," Doujou asserted, a little sullenly. "The difference between being over 170 centimeters and under 170 centimeters is large. It matters in battle and it matters when walking next to a woman. I would be lying if I said I wasn't jealous of Komaki and Tedzuka. Sometimes I think, *If only I were just three centimeters taller...*"

"I think stuff like that too...*If only I were in the high 160s instead...*"

"But *you* get people telling you you look like a model," Doujou said, glancing up at Iku on her stepladder. "A 165 centimeter man just gets people telling him he's short. I think I've got you beat when it comes to height complexes."

"But when we're sparring you can reach all the way up to grab the back of my collar, can't you?"

"Well of course I can! If I couldn't handle someone at your level, how could I have been made squad commander over Komaki!?"

Indeed, the difference in height between Doujou and Komaki was ten centimeters, but they were evenly matched when it came to sparring.

"Since you can match him in sparring even though he's so much taller than you, it must mean you're the better one, right?"

"Evenly matched means evenly matched. Circumstances mean nothing."

Even so, she recognized that he must have had to put in a corresponding amount of effort to make up for his body's disadvantages. And she recognized his nobility, for not using his body's disadvantages as an excuse.

"Why were you made squad commander, Instructor Doujou?"

"It was Commander Genda's decision."

"But what was the reason for it?"

"...I don't remember!"

Doujou very obviously *did* remember. But Iku knew that when he used that tone of voice, wild horses couldn't drag it out of him, so she changed the subject.

"Thank you for all your hard work scrubbing the floors, Doujou-kun. You must be close to throwing out your back," Fuku-san said to Doujou after she returned from drying the laundry.

"No, I'm still young," Doujou said. Iku caught a glimpse of the stubbornness of a man approaching his thirtieth birthday at the end of the year, and bit back a smile. "Anyway, since the floor is handicap accessible all the way to the entryway, it's easy to sweep and scrub."

In the entryway stood the specially-made wheelchair that Inamine had used for his whole tenure as base commander. When he resigned his post, the Logistical Support Division had delivered it to his house. He now used it around his home, switching to his outdoor wheelchair in the entryway when he left the house.

"This used to be a regular, ready-built house. Since it was from Kazuichi-san's time, the veranda and the thresholds of the doors were high--it wasn't very easy for him to get around."

"Ah, so he remodeled," Iku nodded to herself.

"No," Fuku-san laughed, a little sadly. "His relatives, we all told him he should remodel right away. But Kazuichi-san was so reluctant. The house held so many memories of his wife, and he didn't want to change it. For years, he lived in that house and put up with its inconveniences. But one day he fell down the stairs and hurt himself. That's when he finally let us persuade him to remodel."

Iku's head bowed in pain, but she noticed that Doujou was listening to Fuku-san without taking his eyes off her, and with an effort, raised her head.

"Before he called the contractors, he called a florist and a gardener. He had them take all sorts of pictures, and carry away every flower and tree, so that they could recreate the garden that his wife had made. That's why the garden is the only thing that's the same about this house."

"It's a beautiful garden," was all Doujou said. Iku nodded earnestly along with him.

"All right, lunch is ready, you'll just have to heat it up. I'll see you again in the evening," Fuku-san said, and left. She was going back to her own house to do her own housework.

Fuku-san locked the door from outside. After Iku watched the cylinder turn with a *click*, she whispered, "...I always thought it must be so hard for Commander Inamine to live in Hino. Since if it were me, I think I would have moved. But I just didn't get it."

Staying in Inamine's house, she finally understood.

The reason people wanted to get away from the scene of a tragedy was that they wanted to forget that tragedy.

Inamine was different. Inamine didn't want to forget the tragedy of losing his wife.

Inamine had stayed in the town where his wife had been cruelly taken from him. He had preserved the garden his wife had left behind, and preserved his memories of her, and grown into the gentle yet stern Inamine Iku knew.

"...oh, not Commander Inamine, I meant Special Advisor Inamine," she corrected herself after a long moment.

Doujou, heading for the dining room, said, "For conversations like this, I think 'Commander' is fine."

Today's lunch was hayashi rice. Lunch was usually a single entree, with an accompanying salad or something like it. It meant few dishes to wash, for which they were grateful. Fuku-san used a gratuitous number of plates to serve dinner, so even cleaning up after Inamine and Touma's two-person meal was a hassle.

As he brought his spoon to his mouth, Doujou asked Touma, "What have you been doing today, if I may ask?"

Inamine had told Touma and Doujou's squad that they were free to use the office and the library as they pleased, and Touma usually

secluded himself in the office after breakfast and didn't emerge until Fuku-san had finished housecleaning. He seemed to be doing something on the notebook computer he had brought into hiding with him.

"I'm in the middle of writing my next novel...though who knows if I'll be able to publish it anymore."

"How could you--!" Iku cried out without thinking, and Doujou shot a glare at her. Softening her tone, she continued, "I'm sure it won't come to that. Please keep writing. I'll make sure that you can publish it, I promise."

"Oh? That's some boast for a poor, lowly Chief Librarian."

Iku knew that his teasing was meant to lift the gloomy mood, so she put on a show of wounded pride. "I learned that from my superiors, *sir!* Once upon a time, Instructor, even you used your right of discretionary selection--" Doujou's eyes widened, alerting her to her mistake. "--During my training period, remember? You carried out that selection entirely on your own authority!"

"I...I was cleaning up after *you* bit off more than you could chew! Don't even think about doing something like that again!"

*I...think I managed to cover up that slip?* Iku peeked over at Doujou. He was gobbling down his hayashi rice.

And they had even succeeded in making Touma smile.

"When I talk to you people from the Library Force, for some reason it makes me feel like everything is going to work out somehow. When Orikuchi-san told me what was happening, I thought I'd never be able to write novels in Japan again..."

"Everyone's doing their best, wherever they are. We're cooperating with the publishers and the media more than we ever have before. It won't go the way the Media Improvement Committee wants it to."

*Speaking of,* Iku thought, opening her mouth during the lull in the conversation. "Touma-sensei, you've been writing novels since before the Media Improvement Act was passed, haven't you?" Touma had debuted at the age of 23, and the Media Improvement Act had passed three years later. It had been 33 years since the Improvement Act came into effect, and Touma was now 59. As an author who remembered what it had been like before the passage of the Improvement Act, Touma was a valuable resource. "Were you able to write freely, back then?"



*Of course*, was the response she was expecting. But Touma's response was a wry smile. "It didn't make much of a difference. And if you asked the rest of my contemporaries and the older authors, they'd say the same thing."

Iku's disappointment must have been written all over her face, for Touma continued, the wry smile never leaving his face.

"For example, if you used the word '*katateochi*<sup>1</sup>,' readers would write in and say it was discriminatory to people with disabilities. Despite the fact that if you look it up in a dictionary, it specifically says that it's not a word used to point out a physical trait--it's a word that expresses the unfair treatment or favoritism that arises from thinking only about one thing to the exclusion of another. Despite the fact that if you looked at the context in which the word occurred, it clearly wasn't used in a discriminatory way. There would still be people smugly nitpicking those words, even back then. Our editors were the first to yield. They'd be scared that a word could be interpreted in a derogatory way, so they'd say it was 'undesirable.' 'Firing blindly,' 'blind warship<sup>2</sup>,' 'masseur,' 'beggar'... It didn't matter what the context or the historical backdrop of the story was--the publishers began to respond to pressure from readers by imposing voluntary restraints on the vocabulary in our books.

"Those kind of voluntary restraints were already normal by the time I started writing," Touma said, smiling bitterly again. "It took great inner strength to reject those restraints and put something controversial out into the world. There were groups that could bring real pressure to bear. Sometimes a dialogue could be opened and a mutual understanding reached, but as far as I remember of that time, I think it was more common that works were quashed by the violent pressure some groups wielded. And as the rest of us watched from a distance, we learned to make that kind of calculation in our own heads."

Though it might have been just because their meals were nearly finished, none of their spoons were moving anymore.

"I want to take things *this* far in my writing, but if I go that far, would this group or that group zero in on me?' In that case, it was

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<sup>1</sup> I couldn't think of a good English equivalent for this one. Literally it means "missing one arm," but it means to concentrate on one thing to the exclusion of others, to the point that your judgement becomes biased. It's no more derogatory than the word "single-handed" in English.

<sup>2</sup> A kind of warship from medieval Japan that had totally armored sides, shielding the turrets (and making it very difficult to see out of).

safer to take the easy way out and only go so far. And what I'm talking about, it's not at the level of a story's plotline. It's at the level of whether or not to include a single word in a single sentence in a single scene. That's how far you'd have to go to protect yourself."

Touma's generation was already--no, Touma said it happened even before his time. Since that time authors had had to choose their words as if they were walking a tightrope.

Touma's eyes dropped to his nearly-empty plate. "Worse than the malicious ones are the ones who actually have good intentions, sometimes. The malicious ones are clearly aware that they're trying to hurt something. But some of the ones with good intentions aren't even aware of the possibility that they might be doing harm."

Doujou's squad was closely acquainted with two people who had been victimized by those kind of good intentions. Komaki and Marié.

And the Media Improvement Act itself had probably been passed 33 years ago riding on the strength of justice and good intentions.

"...Once, right after I enlisted, I helped Commander Inamine board an elevator."

"You mean the time you called him 'sir' and ran over to him thinking he was a patron?"

"Right. I saw someone in a wheelchair in front of the elevator, so I said, 'A patron in need of assistance!' and went over and asked him which floor he wanted. Commander Inamine gave me such a strange look."

"Of course he did. I'm sure he'd never imagined a Library Force member who didn't recognize him, her own base commander."

Doujou's quip chased the last of the bitterness from Touma's smile.

"So I push Commander Inamine's wheelchair into the elevator, and tried to ride up with him. I thought I would help him off the elevator, too. But he said, 'no, thank you.' That he could make it on his own. I probably looked put-out or confused or something--the question 'but why not?' must have been written all over my face. 'Cause the commander, without letting me know who he was, told me, 'Even patrons must have the right to refuse help. Does that make sense?' At the time, I only vaguely understood--all I thought was that I must have been too pushy, but..."

It was embarrassing to speak so frankly about her own immaturity--her voice had grown hesitant as she told the story.

"That day, I must have been patronizing the commander--this guy in a wheelchair. I didn't understand why he would refuse my 'generous' offer of help, and it made me disgruntled. I'm sure it showed in my face."

Inamine had firmly, but gently, steered her straight.

"I think that's what it means to pressure someone with good intentions. ...Even when it's about words, like we were talking about. The people who zero in on those words don't have any second thoughts about their own goodness. Just like I didn't."

The wave of criticism that had engulfed the library after its refusal to give up the loan records of the underage thrill-killer had been the same.

The library had been right to protect the information it had been entrusted with. The police had been wrong to ask for the loan records without a warrant. But the people who had criticized the library hadn't doubted their own rightness.

Their only scales of justice were their own feelings. But at the same time, their zeal for justice was genuine. That combination was what had exhausted the librarians at that time.

"It makes you scared, 'cause you don't know when you're going to be the one putting pressure on someone. Because I have strong prejudices and jump to conclusions a lot, *I'm* scared that I don't know when I'm putting pressure on someone."

"It's okay to make mistakes. Everybody makes mistakes," Doujou chimed in. "If you make a mistake, it's enough to say, 'I'll be more careful next time.' No matter how many 'next times' it takes."

Touma smiled at Iku. "You're blessed with a good superior."

Doujou's face reddened slightly. She couldn't tell if he was pleased or embarrassed to be directly praised by the author he so admired.

"Oh, isn't that nice, Instructor! He called you a good superior!"

Usually this would be the point where Doujou would bellow, "Shut up!" but apparently this was not to be, when Touma was the cause. His mumbled "Thank you" (or something like it) tickled Iku's funny bone.

"Be that as it may, if you make a blunder now, with the situation Touma-sensei's in, 'I'll be more careful next time' isn't going to cover it. Don't let your guard down."

Iku could only interpret this reproving non-sequitur as an effort to hide his embarrassment, and so her only reaction was to hide a smile.

In the evening, Fuku-san came back, prepared dinner for Inamine and Touma, and then went back home.

Inamine returned around six. This time of year, it was completely dark by then, so it made it difficult for any observers to notice the change in driver and assistant.

The squad held their daily meeting at this time, when all four of them were together. In practice, it was usually just a report on the movements at the Library Base that day. Those standing guard at Inamine's house rarely had anything to report.

During this time Inamine and Touma would eat dinner. Those who had guard duty that night would usually end up cleaning up afterwards.

Right before Doujou and Iku left, the four of them were standing around chatting, when Doujou left to use the bathroom. Iku saw her opportunity and posed to Komaki the question Doujou had avoided answering earlier that day.

"You and Instructor Doujou enlisted at the same time and hold the same rank, right? Why is Instructor Doujou the squad leader?"

"Oh, it was on Commander Genda's orders."

"Yeah, I heard that part..." Iku glanced over at the bathroom Doujou was using, and Komaki laughed knowingly.

"It was because Doujou's better at taking care of people."

*Ohhh, that's why.* Iku nodded vigorously in understanding. Doujou wasn't the type of person who would report such a reason himself.

"I also know that I'm better suited to a support role. I expected the roles to be assigned the way they were, if the two of us formed a new squad."

"I think you would make a suitable squad leader, Officer Komaki..." Tedzuka put in shyly.

Komaki smirked, waving a hand. "I'd get tired of having to pry into the inner workings of other people. I'm not made for molding my subordinates' minds. Doujou doesn't find it tiresome like I would."

"What about Marié-chan...?" Iku worried suddenly. Komaki poked her gently; it was enough to make her understand, and she relaxed.

Doujou returned from the bathroom and picked up his rucksack from the corner of the living room. "Kasahara, we're leaving soon. If you need to go to the bathroom, go now."

"Oh, right right right!"

*At times like this he doesn't treat me like a girl at all,* she thought sourly. Being told to go to the bathroom during a battle was one thing; it wasn't something she wanted to hear in someone's house, and in an all-male group. It was the sort of thing she could manage on her own.

*He may be good at taking care of people, but this is taking it too far!* she thought indignantly, heading for the bathroom.

\*

Doujou drove them back to the base, around which Improvement troops were indeed standing lookout.

They returned the car to a parking lot on the base, and avoiding the main entrance they returned to the dorm. The next day Doujou and Iku would be in charge of Inamine's transportation, and switch places with Komaki and Tedzuka in the evening.

"Alright, see you here tomorrow at 8:30," Doujou told her in the entryway before hurrying away. There were only about two hours before lights out at eleven, in which time they had to eat, bathe, and do laundry.

"Gahhhh, I'm not that tired but there's so much to do..." Iku said as she got back to her room.

"Welcome back," Shibasaki said, folding the cellphone she had been fiddling with and putting it aside.

"Wait, did you get a new cellphone?" Iku asked, noticing it was a different color.

"Sort of," Shibasaki deflected casually. Displaying a rare moment of concern, she said, "Boy, it must be a pain to be constantly switching off on guard duty."

"But if we don't switch every day, we won't be able to stay in the loop. It's not like there's enough time at our meetings during the switch to explain anything complicated."

"Ooh, 'we won't be able to stay in the loop'! What a grown-up thing to say!"

"I'm a Chief Librarian," Iku said, her nose in the air. "I understand it's important, at least."

"Your naïveté remains unchanged," Shibasaki said, causing Iku's nose to droop. *I swear, this woman...* Iku thought, sticking her tongue out.

"What's the current situation?"

"You must know that we've gained the cooperation of the Library of Tomorrow Project."

"Yeah, I heard...but is it true? Tedzuka sounded pretty dubious when he was talking about it."

"Well, I guess there's been a lot of friction between him and his brother. And he's a complicated person, you know?"

"Aren't you worried about being betrayed?" It was a question she couldn't come out and ask in meetings where Tedzuka was present.

"We have their written pledge. If they do something to benefit the Media Improvement Committee, we'll officially expose them to the entire Library Force as a cult-like organization, and they'll be expelled from the Japan Library Association. They agreed to these terms."

"Sure, but someone as smart as Tedzuka's brother could find a loophole, right? That's probably why Tedzuka sounded so dubious..."

"He's just sulking. He thinks this is too little, too late, after all the secret maneuvering that forced Inamine into retirement. He can't bring himself to actually accept his brother's cooperation."

"...I'm getting this feeling," Iku said, pursing her lips, "that you understand Tedzuka really well."

"Well, if a wise girl like me and a sharp boy like Tedzuka start having more contact, it's only natural that we'll start understanding each other better," Shibasaki said nonchalantly.

Iku pursed her lips even more. *I guess I'm not a wise girl.*

"Anyway, for practical purposes you can stop worrying that the Library of Tomorrow Project will betray us. If they were recognized by the Library Force as a cult, the organization itself would collapse, and Tedzuka Satoshi's unifying power would go with it."

Shibasaki's voice took on a lecturing tone.

"It wouldn't be starting over from scratch--it'd be starting over with a deficit. Tedzuka Satoshi is arrogant, but he wants to eliminate censorship just as badly as we do. You should know that; you've spoken to him in person."

"Yep..."

"In a world where the only organization authorized to fight censorship is the Library Force, do you think that Tedzuka Satoshi would really want to make the Library Force his enemy?"

Tedzuka Satoshi's decades-long plan to eliminate censorship was incompatible with the current Library Force without some major strong-arming, thus the Library of Tomorrow project pretended they were only running simulations on the possibility. They had hidden their true objectives from outsiders until now.

Which meant that the revelation of the Library of Tomorrow Project's aims until this point would be a fatal blow to Tedzuka Satoshi.

"Anyway, there are many voices being raised in concern from every ministry and political party over what the Media Improvement Committee is doing with the power it gained from the special counter-terrorism bill."

Censorship was forbidden in the first place by Article 21 of the constitution. The Media Improvement Act, which concerned censorship so deeply, had been enacted inside a black box during the latter half of the Shouwa era, but since it allowed media to be seized only after it was published, it followed the precedent that "ex-post-facto censorship isn't censorship at all," thus came with a built-in defense against its own unconstitutionality.

There were loud voices that said even if a book could be used as a textbook for indiscriminate terrorism, to divest the author of his right to write again would cause too much of an uproar among the citizenry. Even in the Policy Room at the official residence, opinions were divided between the hard-liners and the moderates. In every ministry and political party, those who opposed censorship were in high spirits, because they had a chance to push opinions that they normally couldn't.

The government was split between the hard-liners, the moderates, and those who opposed censorship, but of course there were those among the moderates who wished for censorship to continue, and were pressing for compromise that wouldn't provoke the citizenry so much. The hard-liners wanted to seize this opportunity to expand censorship even more.

"Still, whatever the reason, the political world has been shaken up. This is the chance to drive in the wedge. Even in the Justice Department there are forces that oppose censorship, and they've invited the Library of Tomorrow Project to be their anti-censorship advisory group--as a group that's temporarily cut its ties to the Library Force. Now we have to wait and see how deeply the wedge can be driven in, and how well they can bring the moderate factions and the anti-censorship factions together. After sending us his written pledge

only about ten days ago, Tedzuka's brother has already maneuvered this far--meaning he's quite the tactician."

Shibasaki poured tea into her mug as she spoke, and then poured some for Iku and passed the cup over.

Iku took it, her heart beating like a drum. "...Could this change history?"

"Ooh, you're catching on quick!" Shibasaki smiled in satisfaction, looking like the Cheshire cat. "That chance is indeed dangling before our very eyes. If it comes to fruition, I'd love to be able to swap places with Tedzuka Satoshi."

It made sense, for a woman as ambitious as Shibasaki. Iku herself wasn't up to the role.

"So that makes it all the more important that I keep Touma-sensei safe."

If she thought of it as a chess game, Touma was their king...though she didn't know who the other side's king was.

And Iku's role was to protect and fight for Touma, no matter who or what his enemies were.

Even if it was wrong to shoot a gun to protect him. Her job was to keep pulling the trigger, even if she knew it was wrong.

Iku suddenly remembered the incident at the prefectural exhibition. The battle had only been three short months ago, and one of the Task Force's severely wounded, Officer Shindou of the sniper squad, had finished rehabilitation and returned only last month. Both her hands still remembered the feeling of pulling the trigger until she was out of bullets. But the memory didn't make her hands shake anymore. Next time, she wouldn't find herself in the embarrassing position of needing Doujou to reload the magazine of her gun.

Iku didn't have the capacity for ambition at this crossroads where censorship might be eliminated. She was fine with being a single, nameless soldier. Under Doujou's leadership, if possible.

"Oh, right, I was going to ask you. So, what part of the Law of Library Freedom does protecting Touma-sensei fall under?" Iku asked.

Shibasaki looked shocked. "My goodness, you've been guarding Touma-sensei for all this time and you didn't know?"

"What? Nobody ever told me."

"It falls under the supplementary enforcement orders that have been added to Section Four of the Library Laws since the Law of Library Freedom was passed. There's a line about how our right to fight censorship also covers authors and others who express their



views. Though no one thought the day would come when we would actually have to make use of it."

"What number enforcement order is it?"

"Eighth."

"There's no way I could remember that many!" Iku said, tearing at her hair.

Shibasaki bopped her on the head. "It's okay, this is the first time I've gotten to see your dimwitted side in a while."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"It's the nature of parents to want their children to stand after they learn to crawl, and to walk after they learn to stand, but once they've grown up there are things that they miss, you know? Like, 'aww, you were kind of cute back when you were dumber.'"

"H-How dare you! Who the hell do you think you are!?"

"The great Shibasaki Asako, of course," she replied calmly. Iku collapsed across the top of the *kotatsu*.

\*

That day, Ogata considered the Improvement troops standing next to the main entrance.

"It'll be all over in a minute, Orikuchi-san, so be sure you don't miss your shot with that camera."

Orikuchi, hidden in the shadow of an evergreen thicket in front of the main entrance and flanked by several Library Force members like bodyguards, jerked her chin up.

"I may not look like it, but I *have* done battlefield reporting before. Leave it to me."

It was a heartening answer. Ogata turned to his radio next and began to speak into it. His gaze was directed up toward the roof of the maintenance hangar near the main gate. If he squinted, he could see Shindou, the sniper who had recently finished his rehabilitation, laying low on the roof.

"Shindou, will you be alright?"

"Eh, this toy is perfect for a recent convalescent like me."

Shindou was talking about the small electric air gun he carried. "I tried shooting with it a few times--if the targets are within its range, it should have enough power to give the enemy pause. I don't understand these kinds of toys very well, but according to what the the Logistical Support Division said when they gave it to me, they put

a heavy slug inside the rubber bullet, and it can rapid-fire almost seventy shots...it should be enough to scatter the nearby Improvement troops until you're done. Apparently they've customized it to increase its output."

"Is the arm going to hold up?"

"Eh, with light duty like this it should be fine even if I have to fire everything I've got. I can even fire my spare magazines if you need me to."

"Alright, I'll leave it to you. Let's go!"

Ogata jumped out, and the other Force members followed. Before the Improvement troop lookouts could react, the Force members grabbed the shoulders of the man they had marked, shoved him to the ground, and sat on him.

"Picture!" Ogata ordered, reaching into the inside pocket of the Improvement agent's suit, pulling out the agent's badge, and brandishing it for the camera.

The camera's flash blazed several times, and then the shutter clicked a few more times without the flash on.

Shouts rose from the Improvement troops trying to approach their captured companion, and they all stumbled at the same time. There were five or six of them trying to get closer, but the lone sniper Shindou directed his assault on each of them in turn, allowing none of them to reach their comrade. The Logistical Support Division's bullets may have been rubber, but they packed enough of a punch to make it impossible for the Improvement troops to force their way past them.

Orikuchi thrust a USB recorder in the Improvement trooper's face. "As of today, you people have been watching the Library Base for 21 days! Is your objective the abduction of the author Touma Kurato, who was sheltered in the Base!? Is there truth to the rumor that the Media Improvement Committee is trying to take away Touma's right to write again!?"

"Don't you dare tell them anything!" one of the Improvement troopers bellowed from where he was being checked by Shindou's fire. The order itself hinted at their shady motives. Orikuchi chuckled; there would be plenty of material for an article.

*"You had better pull back soon, or I'm going to run out of bullets to cover your retreat,"* Shindou radioed.

Ogata shoved away the Improvement trooper he had been holding down. "RETREAT!"

As soon as the Library Force members had run through the main entrance, the gate was closed by others who had been standing by. Shindou's ammunition ran out at last, and the Improvement troops ran for the gate and began to complain loudly. They probably wanted to at least get their hands on Orikuchi's camera, but they didn't have permission to enter the library without an enforcement order, let alone the Library Base. If they did, it would be an invasion calculated to set off a fierce lawsuit.

Shindou, who had come down from the roof of the hangar, was admiring his electric gun from different angles. "Ignoring its use in pranks or crimes, it's reasonably useful in small-scale missions where we can't use live ammunition. Over long distances in open spaces the wind would blow the bullets off course, so that's assuming a small battlefield like we had today."

Ogata nodded in agreement. "Unlike the enemy, we don't have the right to start shooting without provocation. But in situations where these toys will suffice, it's probably okay."

The Improvement trooper that Ogata had forced down had carried a gun in a shoulder holster. It was a SIG-P220, which like the Library Force's firearms had ultimately come from the Self-Defense Forces. If Shindou hadn't restrained him, he might have used it.

"Orikuchi-san, will you have enough material for an article?"

"Plenty." Orikuchi thumped her chest. "I expected them to keep their mouths shut. But given the circumstantial evidence, and the shady order that trooper gave, I have enough to write an article that hints at the situation pretty strongly. With the information from the Library of Tomorrow Project, it should be one of the most explosive articles about the Improvement Act yet. I'll be sharing my information with the rest of the publishing world as well."

"I look forward to it."

Thus ended the very minor battle.

\*

The next week, articles hinting at the possibility of a plot to kidnap Touma Kurato and take away his freedom of expression appeared simultaneously in *New World* and other magazines and editorials.

Numerous conjectures were discussed in numerous sources--from the idea that the plot had been ordered by the Prime Minister to

the suggestion that the Media Improvement Committee intended to use this opportunity to expand their authority. At any rate, the affair instantly grabbed the attention of the populace.

Since the political world also contained moderates and those who outright opposed divesting Touma of his freedom of expression, the Improvement Committee couldn't unilaterally censor these articles like it usually could.

Additionally, the news that the Kantou Library Base was harboring Touma was spread to the rest of the Library Force in other parts of the country.

And even as the Library Force and the rest of the world was caught in the maelstrom of that news, in the shelter of Inamine's house, no accidents or unusual events befell Touma.

As if he were isolated from the rest of the world, he continued a peaceful life of seclusion.

That day, Komaki and Tedzuka had been on guard duty. Doujou and Iku had come home with Inamine and taken over for them.

The report from Komaki's team had been utterly normal. They had helped Fuku-san with chores all morning, and in the evening Fuku-san had come as usual to prepare dinner before going back home. Iku peeked in the kitchen; today's dinner was fried mackerel. She had already had her dinner at the dorm before coming, but Iku was still a little jealous. Fuku-san was an excellent cook, and fried mackerel was one of Iku's favorite foods.

Komaki and Tedzuka went home and Iku and Doujou took over guard duty. After Inamine and Touma were done with dinner, they started on cleanup.

Iku plucked the dish towel she always used off its rack--and was proud of herself for not exclaiming. She elbowed Doujou lightly and gave the dish towel rack a significant glance.

A note was hanging from the rack, secured with clear tape.

*Before I arrived this evening, a few men from the Improvement Committee approached me.*

*They asked if Kazuichi-san was sheltering Touma-san. They threatened me, so I ended up saying yes.*

*They handed me a bug and ordered me to plant it in the living room.*

*While Komaki-kun and Tedzuka-kun weren't looking, I stuck it behind the clock in the living room.  
They also made me draw a sketch of the house, and I had to tell them that Touma-san slept in the guest room.  
I'm sorry.*

The note had been written with a shaking hand. Thinking about it, it was probably the best Fuku-san could have done. She was an ordinary, virtuous housewife; there was no reason to expect that she could stand up to the Improvement Committee's threats or orders. And while she was carrying a bug, she couldn't even tell Komaki or Tedzuka what was going on. For a complete novice like Fuku-san, writing a note hadn't been a bad idea, though there was the fear that the eavesdroppers had noticed her long silence and realized what she was doing.

Doujou slipped the note to Inamine and Touma, who were still drinking tea at the table, and headed for the living room. Since it was evening, the curtains were drawn. No one outside should be able to see his movements through the thick shades.

He swiftly peeked behind the wall clock and gave the OK sign. Apparently there really was a bug planted there.

And then he came back, tossing the evening paper to Iku.

"Hey, weren't you saying there was some TV show you wanted to watch tonight?" he asked casually.

Iku took his meaning. "Oh! Right, I had completely forgotten! Thank you so much, Instructor!" She quickly scanned the TV section, looking for the loudest TV show she could find. "Um, turn to TV Tokyo, please. It's called *Extreme! Top 100 Crash Clips*."

"*That's* the kind of show a woman double-checks the paper for!?" Doujou said, feigning shock.

Iku put on a huffy air and shot back, "What's wrong with that? Haven't you ever heard of personal freedom!? I happen to like crash clip shows and cop shows and stuff like that!"

"Fine, whatever. Special Advisor, Touma-san, I'm sorry. It'll probably be loud, but would you like to watch with us?"

"I wouldn't mind a bit. When you get to be my age, television is like background music. Don't you find it so, Touma-san? Do you find yourself falling asleep before the end of the show, too? I'm always frustrated when I'm watching a thriller and I don't get to find out who the culprit was."

"Ah, indeed."

Touma's voice was the only slightly stilted one among them, but he hadn't said enough to betray his self-consciousness.

As they all prepared to pretend to watch Iku's chosen show, Doujou went to the office and grabbed enough notebooks, memo pads, and writing utensils for all of them and passed them around.

The whole time, Iku watched the crash clips and said "whoa!" or "awesome!" at appropriate intervals. Inamine also laughed every so often.

Doujou immediately began writing and held up his notepad for Touma to see.

*--It'll be fine--* it said. *--Just follow the orders we give you. The enemy likely won't raid until deep in the night. A getaway car for you has been stowed in the garage ever since we brought you here.--*

The garage was a shuttered building that had been half-turned into a storeroom. Within a few days of Touma taking refuge at Inamine's, it housed a vehicle that had been bulletproofed from its windshield to its tires.

Inamine was the next one to take up his pen.

*--This house's security system is disguised so it's not obvious at a glance. I'll try to stall the Improvement troops at the house as much as I can while Touma-sensei heads for the Library Base. Officer Doujou, please get in touch with the Base and request backup. We'll also want the cooperation of the local libraries.--*

Doujou nodded and stood up. "Time for my daily report to the Base. Excuse me for a moment."

In an age when all phone calls were digital, it was basically impossible to wiretap a cell phone--supposedly. But it was an open secret that for public institutions, it was possible to use special equipment to intercept a call. The Improvement Committee was no exception, but the Library Force was obliged to carry cell phones customized by the Logistical Support Division, with special codes to prevent wiretapping. Inamine's house phone implemented the same measures. In fact, it was because wiretapping was impossible that the Improvement troopers had gone with the alternative plan of using Fuku-san to plant a bug inside the house.

*--But how on earth do you mean to stall the Improvement troops?--* Touma wrote.

Inamine wrote back, *--I'll take your place in the guest room and wait for them. You will take that chance to escape, following your two*

*bodyguards' guidance. It won't be long before the security company and the local Library Force troops arrive anyway.--*

*--Won't it be dangerous...?--*

*--Just who do you think I am?-- Inamine wrote, smiling. --I'm a survivor of the Nightmare at Hino.--*

*Ah, that's the Commander Inamine I know, Iku thought, her gaze fixed on Inamine's gentle smile. Hikoe just hadn't lived through as much chaos and carnage as Inamine had. It was the same reason why "Commander" kept slipping out of everyone's mouth while in this house. Especially for members of the Task Force, even if he had retired, Inamine would always be their Commander in spirit.*

*On the television, a fighter plane at an air show tried to pull up from a dive too late and plunged to the ground.*

*"Whoa! Did you see that!? I wonder if the pilot was okay..." Iku said loudly, conscious of the bug.*

*A little unexpectedly, it was Touma who answered her. "I think so. I saw the ejection seat launch right before the crash."*

*"You know a lot about planes."*

*"I have some experience with aviation."*

*Perhaps his nerves had calmed a little.*

*"Sorry I had to step out," Doujou said as he returned.*

*Iku affected a blithe exuberance. "Oh, Instructor, you just missed it! There was just this incredible plane crash!"*

*"Oh really? Was it at an air show or something? What model was the plane?" Doujou answered her in a similar tone, sitting down at the dining room table.*

*"C'mon, how would I know something like that?" she whined, deliberately trying to sound as brainless as possible.*

*"It was a Eurofighter, I believe," Touma interjected, sounding very natural now.*

*"I'm impressed you knew it. But not surprised," Doujou replied as he scribbled on his notebook. Iku was well-acquainted with his slightly poor handwriting.*

*--Backup has been arranged. Touma-sensei, things might get rough. I apologize in advance.--*

*--No, I'm the one who should be apologizing. Since I'm not used to fighting, I might freeze up. If I do, please drag me bodily if you have to.--*

*--We'll leave the house and head first for Tachikawa. We'll trust those assigned to protect the house to clean things up here.--*

*--Thank you.--*

After that, they all made simple preparations to carry out the plan, watching television until eleven, when they pretended to go to bed. Aided by the noise of the television, the baggage of those who would be fleeing was loaded into the escape vehicle, and they all settled into their places to wait in the dark.

Specifically, Inamine waited in the guest room, and the rest of them waited in the living room--which was close to the hallway that lead to the garage--shoes on and ready to go.

Calmly and unhurriedly, Doujou led Touma to the shadow of the couch where they had decided he would hide. Iku moved to the shadow of the cabinet, and without making a sound, Doujou slipped behind the television.

The security system's alarm had been deliberately disabled. The notification system was still active, so the security company should be getting a report of a break-in. The phone didn't ring--Inamine had arranged for immediate dispatch of a security team without phone confirmation.

Dark shadows--Improvement troops--crept through the open back door. There were four in total.

There were probably more waiting outside, but it was still fewer than one might have thought. The Improvement troops must be planning to go after just Touma, seizing him as he slept and forcing him out of the house at gunpoint. Since Inamine's house was in a quiet residential neighborhood, any commotion would attract the attention of nearby inhabitants. They were trying to smuggle Touma out without alerting Inamine or his bodyguards.

It was all as the Library Force members had anticipated. They had used to the bug to give their enemies false information that would make that plan seem like the simplest one.

The Improvement troops knew the location of the living room thanks to Fuku-san's map, and thanks to the bug, thought that it was uninhabited. They spared it barely a glance as they headed for the guest room.

When the invaders had turned a blind corner, Doujou and Iku guided Touma to the door that led to the garage.

The back door that the invaders had come through was closed.

"Should I lock the back door?"

"Good idea. Be careful of any lookouts outside."



"Yes, sir."

After this nearly silent conversation, Iku approached the back door, using the agility that the Task Force had fostered in her to move without making noise. She listened as hard as she could, but she couldn't detect any signs that the Improvement troop's backup squad was nearby.

Slowly, gently, so that the cylinder wouldn't make a sound, Iku turned the lock.

It was the Improvement troopers who suddenly opened the door to the guest room, but they were the ones who were taken aback.

Inamine, awaiting his uninvited guests in the middle of the room, smiled thinly.

"I'm sorry I'm not the person you were hoping for. But I'll keep you company until the Library Force and my security company arrives."

One of the Improvement troopers swore and, feeling along the wall, hit the light switch. It must have been arranged that turning on the lights would signal to those waiting outside that the plan had met with failure--but the lights didn't go on.

"It's no use. We loosened the lightbulbs."

"Humph! But even so, what can you do in that wheelchair!? Touma may have escaped with his bodyguards, but we'll catch them soon enough!" the Improvement trooper spat, starting to turn back toward the door--

*Clack!*

There was a loud mechanical-sounding noise, and before it could register, a silver-colored arm had swung up from under the wheelchair and over the seat back.

The Improvement troopers were taken aback a second time--by the double-barreled gun of classical design Inamine held firmly in his arms. It was aimed squarely at the head of the Improvement trooper who stood in the middle and seemed to be their leader.

"A-A weaponized wheelchair...!?"

"This wheelchair was specially made by the Library Force Logistical Support Division. If I had been using this chair during the battle for the Museum of Information History, that brazen abduction would not have succeeded."

"What a ridiculous contraption...!"

"Don't you think it's more ridiculous that such a 'ridiculous contraption' has come in handy many, many times?" Inamine's voice was mild to the last. "Please, don't try and move. *We are in Hino.*"

The Improvement troops showed signs of unease as that gentle voice named the place where they stood.

They were in Hino, and Inamine was a survivor of the Nightmare at Hino.

"When we were young, my wife and I did some skeet shooting. I was pretty good. And I keep this gun in good condition, and tune it up regularly."

Inamine had lost that wife at Hino, as well as the library that had just been constructed. Even the wheelchair that carried Inamine's body symbolized the leg that he had lost at that place.

"Hino is the place where you took everything away from me."

"Th-There's no proof that we were involved in that incident!"

"Shall I rephrase, then? Hino is where the Media Improvement Act took everything from me."

The incident had been caused by a group that supported the Media Improvement Act. Meaning that the Improvement troopers had no grounds to gainsay Inamine's rewording.

"Please, stay put and don't move. All this time, I've been sublimating my desire for revenge over the death of my wife into establishing and leading the Library Force. We are in Hino, and you have come into my house, the one I once shared with my wife, without my permission. Your heads look like nothing more than clay discs to me, at this moment. The merest shred of reason is holding me back from pulling this trigger. But if you move, I may shoot you on instinct."

Inamine's voice was quiet throughout this pronouncement. But it was enough to freeze the invaders where they stood.

There were no sounds of a struggle from the guest room. Inamine was holding the invaders' attention, just as they had planned.

"Alright, time for us to move." Doujou opened the door that led to the garage. "Touma-sensei, sit in the back. Once you get in, duck down in the seat."

Once Touma was crouched down in the back seat as he had been ordered, Doujou silently closed the door. Then he got in the driver's seat. Unlocking the passenger side door, he said, "Ready, Kasahara?"

Iku nodded vigorously. "Leave it to me!"

The garage door was the kind that could be opened either automatically or manually. But they had tested it when they brought the car in, and discovered that it was faster to open manually, if one applied enough brute force.

"Wait just a moment!"

From the back of the garage, Iku picked up two cans of kerosene, which had been kept diligently filled due to the season. She knelt down near the front of the car and set one can on either side of herself.

"On the count of three."

"Yes, sir."

Doujou took up the count. "Three, two, one, zero!"

Doujou gunned the car's engine; at the same time, Iku heaved the garage door up with all her strength.

"Bingo!"

As the Improvement troop lookouts hurried over, alerted by the noise of the engine, Iku lobbed a can of kerosene at each of them, one after another. As the enemy flinched back, Doujou brought the car around, tires squealing, and Iku dove into the passenger seat.

Without even taking time to fasten their seat belts, they took off. Before they had rounded the first corner, they passed the security company's vehicle, speeding with sirens blaring. The Library Force was probably also tripping over their feet in their haste to arrive.

The lookouts they left behind hesitated for a moment, then began to give chase. But they had already put quite a distance between them and pursuit in that first mad dash.

As Iku fastened her seat belt, Doujou asked, "Is your arm alright?"

The way she had flung the garage door up and then immediately thrown two full cans of kerosene apparently had him concerned.

"It's fine. It's not like that's how I train every day."

"At least put a compress or something on it when we get back to the base. When you put a sudden load on a muscle, it's very likely that it will start to hurt later. You already have a bad habit of using your speed to cover for your lack of strength."

These days, she could accept his gruff concern for what it was-- though when she first enlisted, she probably would have snapped, "*Can't you find a less rude way to say that!?*"

"*Will* we actually be able to get back to the base?"

Their enemy had probably gone all out and set up a multistage net to capture them on their way back. Even Iku could guess that much.

"You've grown up," Doujou murmured to himself, and then answered her. "That's why we're heading for Tachikawa first."

Hino wasn't a very bustling town to begin with, and at three in the morning traffic was almost nonexistent.

Tachikawa was only fifteen minutes away, but the Improvement Special Agency was hot on their heels.

"Wait," Iku said as the scenery began to look familiar, "isn't this...?"

Doujou turned the steering wheel. "Yes, it is."

There were in the residential park where the Library Force had bought up a building after Inamine had been kidnapped during the battle for the Museum of Information History. Apparently the houses were not yet on the market--more buildings had been built, but the community still had the same deserted feeling it had had three years ago.

She saw a familiar building--*wait, what's that?*

In front of the building yawned a large rectangular opening.

"Hold on tight!"

The reason that order didn't come out more curtly was probably due to Touma's presence in the back seat. As they got closer, the headlights illuminated the scene, and she could finally tell that the rectangular hole was an open shipping container.

The car drove into the container and stopped suddenly with a shrill squeal from the brakes. They had managed to avoid a head-on collision. Behind them, at the same time, there came a gut-clenching metallic clank--the container had been closed. Subsequent smaller metallic sounds told them that the container was being secured from the outside so it wouldn't open.

And then came a sound Iku hadn't heard in a while--the rotors of the UH-60JA starting up. Even within the car, they could feel the floating, inertial sensation of the container being suspended by a wire from the helicopter.

Doujou killed the engine, and they were plunged into darkness--only natural, since the headlight and the dome light had shut off.

"I'm sorry if the dark makes you nervous, but please endure it for just a little while. It will take less than ten minutes for us to arrive."

"I don't mind the dark," Touma replied. "If anything, it's the claustrophobia."

Iku agreed. "Oh, I know what you mean! I'm a little claustrophobic myself..."

"You too?" Doujou asked, sounding surprised.

"Yeah, I mean, just a little. But being inside a car that's inside a shipping container makes it kinda hard to breathe. Psychologically, I mean. You feel it too, right, Touma-sensei?"

"The feeling of being inside two airtight containers? Yes."

"Let's do our best to endure together! We'll be fine, it's a fast helicopter!"

As she spoke, trying to distract them both, she suddenly felt someone take her right hand<sup>3</sup>. She managed to stifle her cry of surprise just in time.

It was so dark, one of them could have picked their nose without the others noticing; perhaps that explained his sudden impulse. Before she knew what she was doing, she had twined their fingers together. Doujou, perhaps to give her heart, squeezed her fingers in return, and Iku was grateful for the darkness.

She thought she would rather die than have anyone see her expression right now.

\*

At last, they felt the jolt of the shipping container landing on the ground.

Doujou's fingers quietly pulled away from hers.

She had a moment to think, blithely, *I hope my face goes back to its normal color before they open the container*, before it happened.

The air was split by the sounds of violent gunfire. The gunshots seemed to be aimed at the sky; the members of the Improvement Special Agency who had lain in wait were targeting the helicopter. Since a helicopter crash inside the Library Base wouldn't cause any damage to civilian structures, they had no reason to hold back.

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<sup>3</sup> Remember, in Japanese cars (unlike American ones), the driver's side is on the right.

Doujou tuned the two-way radio inside the car to the Library Force's common frequency. It would run down the battery, but there was no other choice, since there didn't seem to be anyone on hand at the base to open the container.

*"The pilot's been shot! Clear a wide landing zone, NOW!"*

Even the very first report that came in was a heart-stopping one.

"What if it crashes on the container...!?" Iku whispered to herself.

"It won't," Doujou told her. "The sound of the rotors has moved away from us; it's no longer directly above us or close enough to hurt us. It must have moved away as soon as the wire that connected us was released. The only question is, how much can they minimize the damage when it lands..."

According to the radio, the first officer had taken over flying the helicopter, but it was still under heavy fire.

"Both the pilot and first officer are veterans, but..." Doujou sounded worried.

*"I'm landing and cutting the engine! Stay back until the rotors have completely stopped spinning!"* the first officer bellowed over the radio. Immediately after, they heard a metallic *smash*. Since the helicopter was far away from the shipping container, the fact that they could hear it meant that it likely hadn't been a safe landing.

At long last, the container was opened. After looking behind him, Doujou released the parking break, put the car in reverse, and backed out. Komaki and Tedzuka were waiting for them when they emerged.

"What happened to the helicopter?" Doujou asked at once.

"It's not clear if it landed, or crash-landed. But it's pretty spectacularly beat-up. The most important thing is that both pilots escaped with only injuries."

"I see. Where should I take the car?"

"The garage for special-use vehicles should be fine. Let Touma-sensei out here, and we'll take him to the administrative building."

*Oh, while you're at it, couldn't you call me over too!?* Iku cried inside. She could still feel the sensation of his fingers carelessly clasping hers in the darkness. She had no idea how to deal with it.

Doujou, driving the car off toward the garage, didn't say anything, so Iku didn't open her mouth either.

After they had safely stowed the car, they set off together for the administrative building.

"Good work today," Doujou said offhandedly, and finally Iku's temporary paralysis lifted.

"Thank you, sir," she said, in something approaching a normal tone. Suddenly she remembered, and asked anxiously, "Do you think Commander Inamine is alright?"

"If anything had happened, Komaki would have mentioned it right away. Remember that we passed the car from the security company during our escape." Not looking at Iku, Doujou added in lecturing tones, "Call him 'Special Advisor' here. Consider Commander Hikoe's position."

"Yes, sir," she replied, bowing her head and not looking at Doujou either.

When Doujou and Iku finally made their silent way back to the Task Force office--

"Good work!"

A crutch was being waved at them in welcome, and Doujou fell to his knees. Iku stared at their greeter, openmouthed in shock.

Finally Doujou looked up sharply and fixed his opponent with a glare. "Why is a wounded man who hasn't even begun his rehabilitation in a place like this at a time like now!?" he shouted.

Genda, wearing a patient gown from the Library Force's usual hospital nearby, replied, "How am I supposed to lay back and rest quietly when something like this happens right after my transfer!? Don't worry, Special Advisor Inamine is safe. The Improvement troops have been handed over to the police for trespassing on private property--though they'll probably invoke some special privilege and get sprung pretty quick."

Doujou buried his head in his hands. "When I heard the plan, I *did* feel a sense of deja-vu...it was such a brute-force way to solve the problem..."

"I'm sorry I didn't tell you, but I didn't want to add to your worries. I knew you'd find out as soon as you got back, anyway," Komaki explained--apparently he was the one Doujou had called from Inamine's house.

Doujou's head snapped up, and he pressed Genda, "You got permission for this day trip--or this night trip, right!?"

"It's alright, the moment the commander arrived here we called the hospital to apologize," Ogata said mollifyingly. But it meant that Genda had indeed left the hospital without permission, and Doujou's eyes flashed.

"Do you know how desperately the nurses must have been searching for you until then? You're an in-patient, so act like one and stay at the hospital like an adult! Not for you sake, but for your nurses' sake, got it!?"

"Don't be such a stick-in-the-mud! It's been so long since we've seen each other!"

As Genda and Doujou quarreled, as they hadn't in so long, Iku quietly tugged on Komaki's sleeve.

"Why is Instructor Doujou so upset? It's something I can imagine Commander Genda doing all too easily..."

"Ah. His mother's a nurse, you see. He knows very well the kind of frantic searching that happens when patients decide to leave the ward on their own."

"Oh, I didn't know!" Though it was neither the time nor the place for it, Iku still felt the victorious sensation of unexpectedly getting to hear something personal about the man she loved.

"Well, we've been using that hospital for a long time, so they already know that Commander Genda is a problematic patient, but legally speaking, if a patient left without permission and got into an accident or something, the hospital would be liable. Every time the commander gets hospitalized and does something like this, Doujou gives him an earful. It's the way it goes."

"Ah, so this isn't the first time the commander's been hospitalized?"

"This is the first time he's had such a serious injury, but yes. Well, he's so reckless, it makes sense that he'd get injured more than your average person."

Doujou suddenly paused his lengthy lecture, looking around as if he had just remembered something. "Where's Touma-sensei?"

Shibasaki, who was ensconced in the office as if she belonged there, answered, "He's resting in the nap room. He seemed understandably tired."

Though his body wasn't injured, his soul must have been weary. No matter that he was an author who had written so many action thrillers--the man himself wasn't used to violence.

"Unfortunately, the enemy now knows where Touma-sensei is hidden."

Ogata said it as if it wasn't actually that unfortunate. As long as they had their link to the Library of Tomorrow Project, and as long as Touma remained protected within the base, Ogata was probably



confident that the Improvement Special Agency wouldn't be able to take him.

"What's happening at Touma-sensei's house?"

Genda hadn't been kept in the loop about the operation, but he was asking all the right questions. Again, it was Ogata who answered. "His wife and his son, a graduate student, are staying in their home in Saitama while he's gone, and the Task Force has had a guard rotation protecting the house since the very beginning. There's also a guard on his family whenever they go out, but they seem to be depressed and have been going out as little as possible."

"That's only to be expected, when the head of a household gets embroiled in a mess like this. The Improvement Committee may preach about protecting human rights, but there's no greater human rights violation than this."

"Anyway, after Orikuchi-san used her connection in the tabloid world to get all the magazines to write about this mess, we revealed to the rest of the Library Force that Touma-sensei was being sheltered at the Kantou Library Base."

"What was the reaction to the article?"

"Same as always," Ogata said, flashing a wry smile. "Going after Touma-sensei may have been a violation of the constitution, after all. Naturally the reactions from citizen groups, writers' associations, and fan have been fierce, and offers of help have been pouring in, not just to the publishing companies, but to the Library Base... Citizens who don't have much interest in the publishing industry are debating which is more important: the adoption of an antiterrorist bill after their country has become a target of indiscriminate terrorism, or the freedom of expression of one writer. As if one could even make a meaningful comparison between the two..."

The Japanese had deeply-rooted fears and misgivings about nuclear accidents, and the fact that a nuclear power plant had actually been targeted for attack was leading a lot of people to reckon "freedom of expression" as the less important issue.

On top of that, most citizens were getting their information from casual glimpses at newspapers and television, and both forms of media were very aware of the limits the Improvement Act placed on them. Many of them simply reported that the debate existed and left the rest up to the judgement of their audience (especially since the antiterrorism bill had actually strengthened the control the Media Improvement Committee had over mass communication).

To be fair, even reporting on the debate was pushing the limits of what journalists were allowed to do in this day and age, and yet--

"You really can't call it anything kinder than cowardly." Genda frowned, lost in thought for a time, until he finally lifted his face. "First thing in the morning, call Orikuchi."

Apparently Genda did not intend to return to the hospital tomorrow--today, that was, since it was after midnight. Even Doujou seemed to have given up; he heaved a sigh but didn't say anything else.

"Ogata, I'm going to need you to return authority to me."

"I was under the impression that I already had."

As their superiors concluded their exchange, the rest of the squads returned to the office.

"The Improvement Special Agency has retreated for the time being. On our side, there were eight injured, including the pilot and first officer. Also, the damage to the UH-60JA was more extensive than previously thought. During the landing, the tail rotor apparently hit the hangar; the blade is a total loss. The gearbox, shaft, and stabilizing fin are also heavily damaged. The Logistical Support Division had a look at it, and they think we'll have to send it back to the manufacturer for repairs."

Everyone in the room grimaced. The UH-60JA was their single prized helicopter. It hurt to lose it; the manufacturer's repairs would probably take some time.

"Still...it could have been a worse landing, with both pilots injured. They did pretty well," Genda said, trying hard to find a silver lining. "Update me on their condition."

"Yes, sir. The pilot was shot in the shoulder; the bullet is still inside so he'll need surgery to get it out. The first officer broke his arm. Additionally, they both appear to have broken several ribs due to the impact of that landing. They're already on the way to the hospital."

"Alright. Thank you for the brief."

The Task Force member sketched a salute and left; there was probably still a lot of cleanup to do.

There was a lull after all the relevant questions had been answered, and they all sank into a weary silence. Then Tedzuka reluctantly opened his mouth.

"But how do you suppose they found out that we were hiding Touma-sensei at Special Advisor Inamine's house, after all this time? Up until now they hadn't been paying it a bit of attention."

Until yesterday there had been no indication that the Improvement Committee had realized that Touma's hiding place had changed. There had been surveillance teams stationed menacingly around the Library Base, but never any sign that Inamine was tailed during his daily commute.

Tedzuka Satoshi at the Library of Tomorrow Project had casually spread the information that Touma was being sheltered at the Library Base throughout the Department of Justice via the moderate and anti-censorship groups there. And the same information had been repeated in the articles published simultaneously by Sesousha and the other tabloids.

Until the articles were published, only a small fraction of Library Force members had known that Touma was being sheltered at the Library Base, but there was no reason the Improvement Committee would have found that out. They would have judged it unlikely in the extreme that the Library Force would adopt the dangerous plan to move Touma from the safety of the Library Base to a private residence. It was precisely *because* it was such an implausible scenario that Touma had been moved to Inamine's house.

Of course, they took into account the fact that rumors leaked from the Library Force to the outside world. After Touma's location was publicized, his true location was disclosed only to Supervisor-level Force members and above. To lower-level Force members, a false rumor was spread that Touma was staying in the visitor quarters of the administrative building.

The scheme to spread disinformation had gone exactly according to plan, and until this very day Touma's person had been safe. Naturally no one had expected this sudden turn of events.

Tedzuka's reluctant tone and expression implied that he was brooding over whether or not his brother Tedzuka Satoshi had secretly plotted the whole thing.

"Even if he was going to betray us, I think Tedzuka Satoshi is too crafty and patient to double-cross us the first chance he got after joining forces with us..."

Genda seemed skeptical about Tedzuka's suspicions. Perhaps it was because of their antagonistic history, but Tedzuka's tendency to mistrust his brother was deeply ingrained, and his superiors knew it.

"Well, just in case, take Shibasaki and check."

"Yes, sir!" Shibasaki replied, tapping Tedzuka on the back.

"C'mon, he'll be up by now. We'll settle this in a jiffy."

Tedzuka stood up, scowling at Shibasaki's relentless urging.

"Wait, why are Shibasaki and Tedzuka going together?" Iku asked without thinking about it.

Shibasaki turned back to answer, looking annoyed. "You think Tedzuka can talk to his brother without losing his cool? After we joined forces with the Library of Tomorrow Project, it fell to me to negotiate with that crafty bastard. But if the call doesn't come from Tedzuka, he won't answer."

Shibasaki had found herself a place to be and a role to play in this affair. Hearing this, Iku understood. It was just like Shibasaki.

Shibasaki left the office and walked down the hall, Tedzuka trailing grudgingly in her wake.

"We didn't need to leave the office, did we? We're just going to report everything we hear right back. And why do you need me along, anyway? We swapped cell phones, so it's not like you need me to call him for you."

"Don't turn all adolescent on me just because your brother's involved," Shibasaki said lightly instead of replying. After a while, she opened her mouth again, a little sullenly. "How much do you think that little girl would squeal and carry on if she saw me matter-of-factly taking out your cell phone?"

"...Would that bother you?"

"If you want to form a peaceful pact with me, you need to remember this: I hate it when *anyone* makes a big deal or teases me about this kind of thing. Even if that person were Kasahara. I trust Kasahara, but that doesn't matter in this case. It's a matter of principle."

*What do you mean by "this kind of thing"?* Tedzuka wanted to ask, but in the end he just couldn't.

In the meantime, Shibasaki had pulled Tedzuka's cell phone out of the pocket of her tracksuit and was scrolling through the directory.

\*

The call was from his brother's number, but when Tedzuka Satoshi answered the phone he found himself speaking with Shibasaki Asako.

"Hello, this is Shibasaki Asako. I know it's late, but of course, you were up anyway, weren't you?" she said in the light, bantering tone she had used since the beginning of their association.

"Once in a while, I'd like to hear my brother's voice when I answer a call from this number."

"Well, things will thaw out between you sooner or later, won't they?"

His brother had quickly started avoiding him once he had acquired Shibasaki Asako as his middleman. Apparently that was how much he relied on Shibasaki.

For Satoshi, this wasn't a very pleasant fact. But it was true that a conversation with Shibasaki proceeded more smoothly than a conversation with his brother.

"Touma-sensei's hiding place was leaked. Personally, I don't think you would be so foolish as to do such a thing, but apparently your brother can't help suspecting you. If you have any ideas, I'd appreciate if you let me know, so I can get out from between this rock and hard place."

"I'm not sure if I should be grateful or heartbroken that you have more faith in me than my own brother."

"Since he's your brother, I'm sure you're well aware of his tendency to turn downright pigheaded when things get complicated. I'm not saying I trust you--I'm just saying that I've judged your abilities objectively. It isn't as if you trust me either, right?"

"True."

"So I don't believe that Tedzuka Satoshi, representative of the Library of Tomorrow Project and signatory of a rather restrictive and disadvantageous written pledge, would be foolish enough to sell us out to the Media Improvement Committee after all this time. After being invited to serve as advisor to the anti-censorship and moderate factions of the political world, if you crossed over to the pro-censorship side, the Library of Tomorrow Project would find itself making more enemies than just the Library Force."

Leaving aside the anti-censorship and moderate factions, pro-censorship groups certainly wouldn't trust a group that had once served as advisor to those other groups.

His brother must have known that too, so basically his friends and Shibasaki had been forced to listen to a childish tantrum. Especially Shibasaki. The way everything she said seemed calculated to defuse his brother told him that.

He had been forced to recognize that she was a formidable woman. Her skill at managing his brother showed that, as well as--  
*My name would go down in history.*

He had admitted defeat after that single sentence. Had been forced to admit defeat. Satoshi had thought for only a moment, and then placed an enormous, terrifying bet on that woman, who had told him she wanted him to with that single sentence.

"The information wasn't leaked by me, or any of the Library of Tomorrow Project's main organizations," he said first of all, and then added, "But I have a guess. I'll confirm it and get in touch with you by morning--is that acceptable?"

"It is. I'll be looking forward to your call."

"Shall I call you at my brother's number? After all, you seem to have taken possession of his cell phone."

"I have," Shibasaki confirmed without a trace of shyness.

"Do you think you could put my brother on the phone?"

"I think so. It looks like our conversation has cleared up his doubts."

The phone was forced into another's hand, and his brother answered. "...What do you want?"

"She is an impressive woman, that one. A big difference from the lady who judges everything by her intuition, and the spoiled little boy." Impervious to Satoshi's raillery by now, his brother listened without comment. "I could see myself wanting her."

"You can't!" his brother shouted reflexively. Just like he had during their fights long ago. *Aha, apparently I missed that voice.* The voice that made it sound like his brother had thrown off his mask, and things had gone back to the way they were.

It was his fault that he didn't get to hear that voice anymore, but it was still precious to him.

"Why not? Do you have some sort of special right to forbid me?"

"No, I--no, I don't think so, but you still can't!"

"If I want to call her, that's entirely up to me, isn't it?"

"Shut up! Like I would let you get your hands on any of my friends! Go to hell!"

His brother still wasn't being honest about his reasons for wanting to keep Satoshi away from Shibasaki, but it was the first time in ten years he had heard his brother childishly telling him to go to hell. Satoshi's face split into a grin as he hung up the phone.

He spun around in his desk chair, then selected a different number on his phone.

The grin on his face has already been replaced by an entirely different expression. The name now displayed in liquid crystal on his phone was Etou Sadahiko.

The call was answered before the first ring was over.

"I assume you know what's going on. It was you, wasn't it?" Satoshi pronounced, not even giving him time to say hello.

Etou was silent for a time. Finally, he replied in a hoarse voice, "The reason I supported you was that I admired the pragmatism of your long-term plan to eliminate censorship. There is no reason for the Library of Tomorrow Project to rashly deviate from that plan, even when unforeseen events occur, as they have now. If we continue down this new path you've chosen, the Library of Tomorrow Project will incur the unalloyed enmity of the Improvement Committee. The lines of communication and trust relationships we've built up will all be for nothing."

"But we'll be able to strengthen our lines of communication with the anti-censorship and moderate factions by the same amount. Depending on how well we cultivate them, it's possible we can make them our main sources. This terrorist act was a rare opportunity for the Improvement Committee, but it's an opportunity for us, too."

"This isn't like you--letting the Library Force wheedle you into throwing away your principle of neutrality. The Library of Tomorrow Project needs to maintain a position of neutrality, so it will survive no matter how matters play out."

"And that's why you sold Touma Kurato to the Media Improvement Committee. Is that it?"

On the other end of the line, Etou sucked in a breath.

"...I didn't *want* to do it," Etou finally replied, voice shaking. "But that's what it means to be neutral. In order for the Library of Tomorrow Project to remain neutral, someone had to cooperate with the Media Improvement Committee to the same extent that you were cooperating with the anti-censorship factions. That's the only way to guarantee that we'll survive no matter what the eventual outcome is. Since you've stepped off the path of neutrality, I was restoring balance."

Satoshi listened until Etou's speech was over, and then asked slowly, "*Did I ever ask you to do such a thing?*"

This time, Etou fell completely silent. Satoshi had listened as he said his piece. Now it was Satoshi's turn.

"It was all your idea to recklessly remove Touma from the dorm where he was being sheltered in the first place. I never gave that order. Perhaps in your own way you thought you were acting for the Library of Tomorrow Project, but..."

Satoshi had ordered him to hold. Not only had he disregarded the chain of command, he had done so for his own self-important reasons.

"The reason I had to abandon what you call our 'principle of neutrality' was to save you and the Project member you made your accomplice--perhaps I need to point that out to you. When you apologized for that incident, I didn't ask for more details. It was pointless to ask. Excuses don't change the fact that screwing up and causing such an incident leaves the Library of Tomorrow Project open to being labeled as a cult organization within the Library Force. And if I had forced you out of the Project, it would have unsettled the rest of the members and affected my ability to lead them. In the long run, the Library of Tomorrow Project would have broken apart."

It wasn't all due to Shibasaki's power of persuasion. Etou's presumptuous actions had necessitated a large-scale policy shift for the Library of Tomorrow Project.

When the Library of Tomorrow Project had held an emergency meeting, and hammered out a new plan to cut its previous ties to the Media Improvement Committee and acquiesce to the invitation of the anti-censorship faction, there had been an uproar among the rest of the members. Satoshi had explained the policy shift as using the special counter-terrorism bill *against* the Media Improvement Committee, and had pointed out the advantages of officially cooperating with the Library Force; he had hoped that Etou would be grateful to him for not explaining the shift as a consequence of Etou's lapse in judgement. Though if he had blamed it on Etou, Satoshi's credibility as a leader probably would have taken a hit, and Satoshi had of course taken this into account.

"Moreover, I am not so narrow-minded a person that I can't imagine other ways of abolishing censorship besides holding a position of neutrality. If circumstances surpass my predictions, I flatter myself that I have the ability to be flexible."

"If you should fail, how do you intend to take responsibility?"

*Damn. I can't put up with this much longer.* Etou still thought of himself as a key figure in the Library of Tomorrow Project.



"I started the Library of Tomorrow Project in the first place. It's mine to shut down. If that happens, you're free to start your own ideal version of the Library of Tomorrow Project, and choose to follow principles of strict neutrality or whatever you please."

"How do you intend to take responsibility for those who acted in accordance with your principles?"

The presumptuous naïveté underlying this question was the last straw. Satoshi's self-restraint broke.

"Don't delude yourself. I don't remember pressing anyone to 'act in accordance with my principles.' That includes you. You, and all the other members, chose to join the Library of Tomorrow Project of your own free will. You ask me to take responsibility for the free choices made by other people? What are you, a child? Everyone who is dissatisfied with the direction I'm taking the Library of Tomorrow Project in is free to leave."

In reality, even after he had announced the policy shift, no one had left the Project. That was probably why Etou remained.

"However, as long as you remain with the Library of Tomorrow Project, you have a duty to accept and go along with that policy shift. And to refrain from taking actions that are detrimental to the Project."

As expected, Etou was making no attempt to reply anymore. He knew what the verdict would be.

"Library Supervisor Special Class Etou Sadahiko. You have already endangered the existence of the Library of Tomorrow Project twice. I hereby expel you from the Project."

He could imagine Etou's paling face on the other end of the line.

"I will inform Commander Hikoe of the Library Force that you leaked information about Touma to the Improvement Committee. And let the Library Force decide how to deal with you."

Etou said nothing. Satoshi left it at that, and hung up.

\*

That morning, a formal report came to the Library Force from the Library of Tomorrow Project.

It stated that due to dissatisfaction with a policy shift toward closer cooperation with the Library Force, a top member of the Library of Tomorrow Project, Library Supervisor Special Class Etou Sadahiko, had leaked information to the Media Improvement Committee and as a result had been expelled from the Project.

The implication was clear. *Deal with him as you see fit.*

Within the day, Etou had been dismissed from his post as director of the Musashino First Library, and summoned to appear before an inquiry composed of members of both the principlist and governmentalist factions. Tedzuka Satoshi apparently retained his leadership power over the Library of Tomorrow Project, for there was little sympathy for Etou even among other members of the Project.

Amid some moderate upheaval at the Musashino First Library, the assistant director, Library Supervisor Second Class Hatano, took on the role of Acting Director for the time being. Before Etou had assumed the role of director, Toba had been the acting director, but Hatano had been the acting director before that, so there was no administrative chaos.

And on Genda's invitation, Orikuchi came to see the Library Task Force.

"Oh, for heaven's sake," Orikuchi complained as soon as she arrived. "That getup again?" She was referring to his patient gown.

*I guess this really has happened more than once,* Iku thought to herself as she watched the pair. Also, based on what she had seen so far, Genda was preternaturally fast on his crutches. Given a straight corridor, he could move so fast that healthy people had to jog to keep up with him.

"Oh, leave it be. It was an emergency."

"Yes, yes, I heard about Touma-sensei's ordeal," Orikuchi said, turning to Doujou's squad. "I hear that I have you two to thank for bringing him back safely, Iku-chan, Doujou-kun. Thank you." Orikuchi bowed.

Doujou answered her gravely. "Not at all. It was a mission that took the entire Force to pull off. Particularly Special Advisor Inamine, who acted as bait for us."

"But wasn't Iku-chan injured?" Orikuchi said, her nose twitching.

"Oh, this is just..."

Iku drew herself in and hugged her arms to her chest. Orikuchi must have smelled the medicated compresses Iku wore under her uniform's long sleeves.

"I put the compresses on just in case. I kind of overdid it with my arms yesterday. But I'm not injured."

As Doujou had ordered, she had put the compresses on as soon as she got back to the base, so she didn't feel any pain.

"What did you do?"

"Ummm...I lifted a garage door manually, and then I threw two cans of kerosene at the enemy."

"Empty cans?"

"No, full."

Orikuchi looked up at the ceiling as if struck dumb. Indeed, she must have been, for her next words came out in a whisper. "I could never do that..."

"Normal women don't have to be able to do that. I'm a soldier, after all."

"You shouldn't be doing it either!" said Doujou, swinging his fist around with a thump. "You're going to dislocate your shoulder if you use your arms like that. You could have picked something lighter to throw, you know!"

He had apparently been holding in this tirade since yesterday. He had been too busy driving to deliver it during their escape, and he had probably resisted giving her grief during their helicopter ride so her morale would stay up.

*Dammit, it should be against the rules to let this much time go by, though,* Iku thought, clutching her painful head.

"So, where is Touma-sensei?"

"He's still resting in the nap room--he was up practically all night," answered Shibasaki as she brought over tea for Orikuchi. "When he wakes up, we plan to take him to the infirmary and get him a minor checkup. He's been under a lot of stress."

"Yes, I've heard what happened...but I can hardly believe it-- Director Etou..."

"Commander Hikoe's so fired up that he wants to start the inquest *today*. Director Etou will probably end up with a demotion and a pay cut. I wonder if they'll demote him by one rank or two...well, that's someone else's problem, and I'm glad," Genda laughed.

Iku flinched and hunched her shoulders, remembering the shame of her own inquest and the trouble she had brought the Task Force because of it.

Then she noticed that Doujou looked a little irritated as well. He was probably remembering his own long-ago experience with the inquest committee.

At length, Orikuchi nonchalantly claimed an open chair, sipped the tea Shibasaki had brought her, and asked, "So, why am I here this time?"

None of the other Task Force members had been told either. Doujou's squad, Ogata, and Shibasaki all turned their eyes to Genda.

Genda's face turned grave, and he answered Orikuchi's question with a question of his own. "How many of the mass media companies would rally if Sesousha called them?"

It wasn't the kind of question Orikuchi could answer off the top of her head.

"It depends on which mass media companies you're talking about. We have connections to most of the publishing companies, but..."

"What about the TV companies? Radio? Newspaper?"

"Well..." Orikuchi looked down, thinking hard. "I can't speak for everyone--there are publishers that are good at forming relationships with other media companies, and publishers that have no connections at all. Most of the national papers have an affiliated TV channel, and sometimes affiliated publishers. In Sesousha's case, hmmm...it's not like we don't have *any* connections to broadcast companies, but I'd have to ask the sales and PR departments..."

Then Orikuchi lifted her head.

"What is it you have in mind, Genda-kun?"

Genda answered immediately, "I want to form an alliance among all the media companies."

Everyone gasped.

"I'm fully aware that it might sound crazy. But though this nuclear terrorist attack was a rare opportunity for our opponents, it's a chance for us too. Every prediction points to the Media Improvement Committee starting a hunt for authors and ideas they disagree with, starting with Touma-sensei. Those who benefit from censorship, those who believe that it's the right medicine for society's ills, and even the moderate and anti-censorship factions in government and politics who have been laying low until now have all suddenly come to the forefront. The Improvement Act, which was enacted in a political black box, is coming close to violating the inviolable Article 21 of the constitution, freedom of expression. Their flimsy justification has carried them so far, but when they start taking away an author's right to write? Their justification gets even flimsier, even with the provisions of the special counter-terrorism law."

That was why Touma's supporters, with Sesousha at their core, were gearing up for a lawsuit over the violation of his human rights.

"If the proponents of the Act press their advantage, preying on fears of nuclear terrorism, they'll cement the legality of censorship. Right now they claim that since they don't seize media until after distribution, it's not really censorship--but they won't even need that flimsy excuse anymore. It'll be enough to order authors divested of their freedom of expression in the name of maintaining public security. However, this is still a dangerous gamble for them."

Even so, those who benefited from the Media Improvement Act had probably calculated that such a good chance would never come again.

"If the Improvement Act's scope is permanently expanded to include hunting down authors and ideas they deem unworthy, the power of the Law of Library Freedom will be eroded. If the Improvement Special Agency starts hunting those authors all at once, the Library Force isn't large enough to protect them all. When those who produce media themselves are hunted down, the Law of Library Freedom loses its very reason for existence."

"Yes, I know that," Orikuchi burst in, "that's why we're preparing for the lawsuit..."

"It's a weak move," Genda said forcefully. "Our opponent will use the peculiarities of Touma-sensei's case to manipulate public opinion. If they can create a precedent with this case, using its extraordinary circumstances as an excuse, they win--the citizenry will forgive them for this one. Public opinion will reluctantly allow controls on the freedom of expression of the man who wrote *The Reactor Crisis*, the book that may have been used as a textbook for nuclear terrorism. And then there's the biggest problem of all."

Genda drove one of his crutches into the floor. *Bam!* Everyone jumped.

"Touma-sensei is a writer."

"What...what does that have to do with anything, sir?" Iku finally asked.

Genda gave her a bitter smile. "It means that Touma-sensei's plight doesn't matter to people who don't read books."

"Blindsided" was the only word that could describe the room's reaction.

"Frankly, even if the weekly magazines report on Touma-sensei's case, it won't cause much of an uproar among the general public. At best, an authors' association might sponsor a protest or a forum, and

there might be a petition signed by his readers. But nothing big enough to inspire the whole country to act."

None of this would matter either, to people who didn't read books. *What's the big deal?* they would say. *Aren't you scared of another terrorist attack? If it helps protect us from terrorism, what's one author--*

They didn't know that hunting down "just one author" would have such fatal consequences.

"...Unfortunately, I can't deny any of that. Print is not top dog of today's media world. The decline in serious reading by the entire population has been a problem for a long time, and it's only gotten worse in this age of rampant censorship."

Television had been easily tamed. TV dramas and variety shows stuck to the Improvement Act's broadcast code and never used taboo words. Movies, at least the frivolous ones, were the same way.

Even manga, whose dialogue and pictures had to be checked by hand and often weren't censored until after they had made their appearances in weekly anthologies, had begun to self-censor.

"That's why we have to do this." Genda gave a carnivorous smile. "What do you say--shall we reveal the Media Improvement Act's true form to the world it has broken and tamed?" Genda went on. "But it won't have a big enough impact if only the publishers are involved. No, to deliver the biggest punch, we've gotta get the television networks. All of the main channels, if possible. Can you make it work somehow, Orikuchi?"

"'Make it work somehow!' you mean?" Orikuchi replied with a wry grin.

"Either way," Genda nodded unrepentantly.

Orikuchi grabbed her bag and stood quickly. "And on top of that impossible demand, you also want it done as quickly as possible, I suppose. Well, then, please excuse me for today. Give my regards to Touma-sensei when he wakes up." Orikuchi walked out of the office, heels clicking rhythmically.

"Everybody got that?" Genda boomed, his voice bold and powerful as only Genda's could be. "That rare opportunity I was talking about? We're going to be the ones who seize it."

And that was that.

## Chapter 3, Seize the Opportunity

\*

That day, during the taping of the headline news program at Delta TV, the station that boasted the widest viewership in Tokyo, the studio was permeated by a strange tension.

The familiar opening played, and then the camera zoomed in on the two news anchors, male and female.

The anchorman began. "It's the season between Valentine's Day and the Hinamatsuri<sup>4</sup> holiday sales war. But causing even more of a stir among the public is, of course, the terrorist attack on the Tsuruga reactor."

A clip of the aftermath of the attack, which by now had been broadcast countless times, was shown.

"An international terrorist organization announced in a statement that their leaders had declared that Japan, as a developed capitalist country, was complicit in supporting global inequality and could not be excluded as a target of terrorism. In response, a special counter-terrorism bill was drafted in the Prime Minister's Policy Room and passed, strengthening the power of the police and the Ministry of Defense in order to maintain security. Their efforts are still underway."

Here the anchorwoman took over. "Immediately following the attack, similarities were pointed out between author Touma Kurato's book *The Reactor Crisis* and the circumstances of the attack. In regards to that...according to evidence provided by the Library Force, it had become apparent that there is a high probability that the Media Improvement Committee is trying very hard to deprive Touma Kurato of his freedom of expression."

A very different clip was shown.

The footage had been shot at night by someone on the ground with a Handycam. A helicopter with a shipping container dangling from it was trying to land inside the Library Base, but was being bombarded by heavy gunfire from outside the base.

The wire securing the shipping container was detached from the helicopter, and the helicopter moved away from the container. The

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<sup>4</sup> A Japanese holiday for girls, celebrated on March 3rd.

camera followed its motion; the helicopter was still being relentlessly hounded by gunfire.

Radio transmissions played over the clip.

*"The pilot's been shot! Clear a wide landing zone, NOW!"*

*"I'm landing and cutting the engine! Stay back until the rotors have completely stopped spinning!"*

At length, there was a metallic *crash*, picked up by the Handycam's microphone. The person with the camera ran toward the sound; the picture shook.

When the camera was steady once more, it showed an all-purpose helicopter smashed on the ground, its tail rammed into the hangar.

"According to the Library Force's announcement, both the pilot and the first officer of the helicopter were badly wounded by gunfire and the shock of impact." Here the anchorman turned to the anchorwoman and asked, "Otonashi-san, can you tell us just what's being shown in this clip?"

"This is footage from a battle between the Library Force and the Improvement Special Agency over Touma Kurato. It was provided to us by the Library Force."

"Can you give us some context for this clip?"

"Yes. Apparently not long after the special anti-terrorism bill was passed, the Prime Minister's office decided that Touma, as a person so dangerous that his book could be used as a textbook for terrorists, should have his freedom of expression taken from him. Touma's supporters learned of this plan and asked the Library Force to protect him, and he was sheltered at a certain place. But the Improvement Committee discovered his location..."

"And the Improvement Special Agency went there to try and capture him, I hear?"

"Yes, that's what happened. The Library Force prevented Touma's abduction and helped him escape from his hideout. The shipping container the helicopter was carrying? Apparently their getaway car was inside it--as were Touma and his bodyguards from the Library Force."

"The Improvement Special Agency fired on a helicopter carrying a container with people inside!? And the helicopter itself met with a terrible fate, as well. Why do you suppose the Improvement Special Agency went so far?"



"To answer that question, we have testimony from the Library Force."

A new clip was shown. Shot from above, it showed someone in a Library Force uniform from the neck down, long legs folded around a stool.

*"I don't think that business with the shipping container was meant to terminate Touma-sensei. The Media Improvement Committee's objective was and still is to capture Touma-sensei alive and take away his freedom of expression. No, attacking the helicopter was a kind of revenge. It happens a lot. The rules of engagement in this censorship dispute state that it is forbidden to fire on a target with intent to kill, but it's constantly clear that the Improvement Special Agency plans to start disregarding this rule at some point. It was the same at the Ibaraki Prefectural Art Exhibition. If they had shot down the helicopter above the city and there were civilian casualties, the Improvement Committee would have been held responsible; but if it crashes on the grounds of the Library Base, only Library Force members are at risk of injury. So they deliberately aimed their fire at the cockpit, while the pilots were in the middle of a delicate landing maneuver. Fortunately the pilots escaped with only injuries, but..."*

The camera cut back to the studio.

"Not a very humane thing to do, was it," the anchorman murmured, and then turned back to the anchorwoman. "But--freedom of expression is a right guaranteed to all citizens by Article 21 of the constitution. Is it even possible for the country to take it away?" he asked.

The anchorwoman answered, "We have an expert's analysis on that very subject. Let's watch that now."

The identity of the person in this clip was even more securely concealed than the Library Force officer's; even their voice was altered.

*"It's because this is such an extraordinary case. There is a political faction within the Prime Minister's office--as well as the cabinet, the ministries, and the rest of the political world--that wants to exploit the citizenry's fear of another terrorist attack and insist that they have no choice but to take away Touma's freedom of expression. They claimed that Touma's is a special case, took advantage of this state of emergency, and had a clause added to the Media Improvement Act that allowed them to completely restrict the freedom of expression of a specific person temporarily. That's the basis for the*

*Improvement Special Agency's pursuit of Touma. I thank god that the Law of Library Freedom that was passed thirty years ago includes clauses that allow the Library Force to fight it and protect Touma...anyway."*

The speaker, a pixelated mass on the screen, continued to explain.

*"The supporters of the Improvement Act expect that people will overlook their treatment of Touma-sensei because of his extraordinary circumstances. If the citizenry lets Touma's case pass by without protest, it will be the beginning of the death of the freedom of expression guaranteed by Article 21 of the constitution. And everyone already knows how forcible the Media Improvement Committee can be in pursuit of censorship."*

A new clip was shown.

This time it was a person shot from behind from the neck down; their voice had also been altered. A caption on the screen identified them as "A, who has inside information from the Prime Minister's office."

*"Even within the Prime Minister's situation room, opinions on what to do about the Media Improvement Committee are split right in half. The strongest claims that censorship laws should be toughened seem to be coming from outside the Prime Minister's office, especially from influential political factions that support the Justice Department and the Media Improvement Act. But this case is unusual in that there's also been firmly-rooted opposition. A faction that opposes censorship has appeared within the Justice Department itself, the organization that enforces the Media Improvement Act; there's also been powerful opposition from the police, the Ministry of Defense, and other organizations charged with actually keeping the peace. This incident has turned into an opportunity for a vigorous debate within the political world over the Media Improvement Act, and one can see various factions that oppose censorship moving to unite. Additionally--when one thinks of fighting censorship, one thinks of the Library Force, of course--well, a think tank called the Library of Tomorrow Project has been temporarily transferred from the Library Force to the Justice Department to form the core of the anti-censorship faction and act as an advising body.*

*"Unlike the Media Improvement Act, which was passed thirty-odd years ago, reached its current status by a slow accumulation of a body of precedent, and is now too powerful to touch--unlike that law, the*

*measures currently being taken in accordance with the special anti-terrorism law blatantly violate the constitution and aim to revoke rights granted to all citizens. If we sanction this violence against one person, eventually Japan will become a society that allows suppression of certain views. It's obvious that the supporters of the Improvement Act meant to carry these measures out secretly, setting a precedent and turning Touma into 'the first of many.' But the Prime Minister's office balked at these measures, as one would expect. It's only natural; one slip-up, one constitutional violation, could lead to mass resignations. A mass resignation of the Cabinet over a constitutional violation would put a heavy blot on the careers of the politicians and bureaucrats who followed them. It's fair to assume that some sort of deal was made with the faction that pushed this plan through.*

*"But things being what they are, there were probably several cabinet members who refused that deal. Seeing the plan that the Media Improvement Act supporters hoped to carry out in secret splashed all over the tabloids makes that seem very likely, in fact. There was probably more than one person who leaked that plan to the outside world the moment it reached their ears."*

The camera showed the studio again. The anchorman was holding up a sign for the camera.

"This is the text of Article 21 of the constitution."

*Constitution of Japan  
Chapter 3, Rights and Duties of the People*

*Article 21.*

- 1. Freedom of assembly and association as well as speech, press and all other forms of expression are guaranteed.*
- 2. No censorship shall be maintained, nor shall the secrecy of any means of communication be violated.*

"When we read it over again like this, the Media Improvement Act seems like a law that flies right in the face of the constitution. Also, let's think about the commonly accepted wisdom regarding terrorist attacks: the goal of terrorism is to sow confusion and fear in a society, and sit back and wait for it to tear itself apart. This is also what the crisis management experts say. Given that, if the Japanese government reacts to the Tsuruga nuclear terrorism attacks by twisting our own constitution and taking away rights guaranteed to our

citizens, doesn't that amount to giving in to the terrorists? If we did that, Japan would be known among the developed nations as the country that surrendered to international terrorism."

The anchorwoman added, "There are many questions and suspicions surrounding the process by which the Media Improvement Act was passed. Perhaps, in some dark way, we should look upon this terrorist incident as a fortunate opportunity to reconsider the pros and cons of the Media Improvement Act."

Just then, someone offscreen appeared to say something to the anchorwoman. Something was passed to her under the table, and she turned back to the camera.

"This just in."

Neither she nor the anchorman looked particularly surprised at the break in the script.

"We at Delta TV have just received a faxed notice from the Media Improvement Committee. According to this notice, because of the inappropriate content of today's news report, Delta TV will be subject to a 24-hour broadcast blackout tomorrow."

The anchorwoman unfolded the fax and held it up for the camera, which closed in on the high-handed typed notice and its "Justice Department: Media Improvement Committee" signature.

"If we have our way, all broadcasts scheduled for tomorrow will be postponed until the day after, when the prohibition is lifted. Broadcasts scheduled for that day will be postponed until the day after that, et cetera. We thank you for your understanding."

The anchorwoman bowed her head deeply, and the camera focused on the anchorman.

"Today's report on the Media Improvement Act and terrorism is scheduled to continue tomorrow on one of the channels that is not under a broadcast blackout. We apologize for the inconvenience, but we ask that you find it and stay tuned."

Finally, both anchors bowed deeply, and then moved on to the next story as if nothing had happened.

\*

Delta TV's broadcast began a period of time where one major network was under a broadcast blackout on any given day.

For 24 hours, those stations showed nothing but a placard apologizing thusly: *"We are under a broadcast blackout imposed by*

*the Media Improvement Committee. No programs may be broadcast until tomorrow."*

The TV listings printed in newspapers and magazines lost all meaning, and viewers were forced to check airdates and search for the programs they wanted to watch themselves. Every station had prepared a system on their homepages for looking up a program's new airing time, but complaints from viewers were still through the roof.

But the other thing that was going through the roof was the ratings for the Improvement Act Report, which continued to be passed from station to station. Along with the major Tokyo networks, in outlying regions the minor networks, the local networks, and even the cable networks took part in airing the station-hopping report. Chaos in the newsroom and interest in the Improvement Act Report permeated the entire country.

The networks' sponsors, noting the ratings and attention the Report was getting, decided that supporting it would make them appealing to viewers. There was only a minor kerfuffle as a small number of sponsors pulled their commercials.

*"It's a pain that all the shows I wanna watch are at random times." (Corporate worker, female, 23)*

*"Children really look forward to certain shows. Couldn't they make a special channel for just those shows, so they could escape the blackouts?" (Housewife, 32)*

*"Of course it's inconvenient to have to hunt for the shows I want to watch, but given the content of the roaming report, of course the Improvement Committee is pulling it." (Technical school student, male, 21)*

*"The content being broadcast in the roaming report is worthy and relevant. I can't imagine what could be inappropriate about broadcasting it. I can only conclude that it's being pulled because it's embarrassing to the Improvement Act." (Corporate worker, male, 46)*

*"All my shows are at the wrong times! Knock it off with the roaming report already!" (College student, male, 20)*

*"Nothing in the roaming report seems all that controversial to me. Seeing it get pulled makes me realize how easy the news stations have been going on the Improvement Act until now." (High school student, female, 17)*

*"Right now I'm having a lot of fun chasing the roaming report from station to station!" (College student, male, 22)*

*"Since you can check a station's home page for any show's new airtime, I wouldn't mind if the roaming report continued forever. It'd be amazing if they could go all the way back to the Shouwa era and get the real story behind how the Improvement Act was passed." (Corporate worker, male, 33)*

*"I'm a fan of Touma-sensei's, and I'm not just going to sit back and let them take away his livelihood as an author!" (Corporate worker, male, 55)*

*"If they take away Touma-sensei's right to write, who knows when they'll do the same thing to someone else? I don't want something like this to happen to my favorite authors and musicians. Down with the Improvement Act!" (Corporate worker, female, 27)*

*"But those terrorists used Touma Kurato's book as a reference for the attack on the reactor, right? In that case I don't think a few restrictions on his freedom of expression are unexpected... Oh, they haven't determined yet if the terrorists actually did use his book for reference? Right, they can't be sure, since they're all dead. Well, but if it looks like a duck, and quacks like a duck...y'know?" (Unemployed, male, 24)*

*"I'm scared of another terrorist attack...so I think it would be better to put restrictions on authors." (High school student, female, 18)*

*"I'm embarrassed to admit this, but until now I never had much interest in the Media Improvement Act. And I'm not much of a reader, so I didn't think that Touma Kurato's problems had anything to do with me. But now that the media's trying to do real journalism like this again, I realized for the first time how far our society had fallen into disorder thanks to that law. I felt ashamed of my own ignorance." (Unemployed, male, 67)*

After the flurry of man-on-the-street interviews had concluded, a new face appeared on the screen. "There he is!" Iku cried. Force members were clustered around the TV in the Task Force office. Out of all of them, Tedzuka was the only one wearing a scowl.

On the screen was Tedzuka Satoshi. He had been invited to act as a commentator on that day's installment of the roaming report.

"Well, he looks good on camera! I'd expect nothing less from your brother!" Genda slapped Tedzuka on the back, and Tedzuka's expression darkened by another degree.

"Should I care, sir?"

"Yes, you should. Appearances are very important when you're trying to convince people like this. Your brother plays the part well--he looks like a breath of fresh air."

Genda wasn't paying attention to Tedzuka at all. Watching them talk past each other, Iku and Shibasaki started to snicker.

"Offering us commentary today is Tedzuka Satoshi, director of the Library of Tomorrow Project, which was invited to join the Justice Department as an advising body to the anti-censorship faction. Tedzuka-san, thank you for joining us."

"Thank you for having me."

Tedzuka Satoshi returned the reporter's greeting, looking both alert and relaxed.

"Now then, Tedzuka-san. We'd like to talk to you today about the legality of the Media Improvement Act and censorship in general."

"The first thing I should say is, the Japanese constitution does not permit censorship of any kind. Article 21, clause 2 says straight out, 'No censorship shall be maintained.' But the Improvement Act uses a loophole based on a precedent which narrows the definition of 'censorship,' and says that ex-post-facto censorship is not actually censorship. But it certainly violates Article 21, clause 1, which guarantees freedom of expression. We'll leave aside any discussion of changing the constitution--the fact is that the Media Improvement Act is completely unconstitutional. We must call its very passage an anomaly."

"But the practical problem here is, the Media Improvement Act was passed, and is actively enforced."

"To talk about that, we need to go back 33 years and make some conjectures about the real story of how the law was passed. According to the contemporaneous media coverage of the draft version of the Improvement Act, which was donated to the Kantou Library Force's collection by the Museum of Information History, the backers of the Act claimed that preservation of human rights was one of their goals, and that censorship and suppression of free speech was not the main idea of the Act. However, the draft version they submitted was full of holes that left censorship and suppression of free speech a possibility. Many commentators have already pointed out that those holes were probably intentional."

"Why was such a law passed, and why does it continue to be in effect to this day?"

"Because it has benefits for its supporters. We can't overlook that."

"Benefits?"

"It's very convenient for the government to possess an organization that can legally hunt down any embarrassing or unfavorable speech. And it must be assumed that such a convenient organization shares in some of the benefits it confers. It's such a valuable law that it's worth it to tolerate the violent ways it's enforced. As for how it was passed, I must lay the blame on the attitude of the news media, and the citizenry's indifference to politics at the time."

"That's quite harsh."

"It was an era where the media coverage jumped from scandal to scandal with no follow-up. Even the fact that they ended up destroying innocent people's reputations did not appear to give the media a moment's pause. It laid the groundwork for mistrust of the media by the judicial branch. I've heard that there were many in the judicial branch who earnestly wanted to preserve human rights, and supported the Act. And the media, whose job it is to scream and shout when there's a crisis like the imminent passage of the Improvement Act, overlooked the dangers posed by the draft of the Act and didn't make a ruckus like they were supposed to. The media at the time had no trouble following a scandal involving a certain politician, though--and there are those who believe it was manufactured as a distraction from the Act. And then on top of that we had the citizenry's apathy. It was a plus for the supporters of the Act, and a minus for its detractors."

"And as a result of its passage..."

"The last of the man-on-the-street interviewees we just heard spoke truly. If censorship and the Improvement Act never impact you or the media you're interested in, you can exist in blissful ignorance. But it's such a tyrannical law that when the mass media tries to do a news story like this, without tiptoeing around the Improvement Act, the story has to hop from station to station. I believe the media is undertaking a great enterprise here: standing up to the Improvement Committee and broadcasting a report like this on television, the most influential medium in our society. It's showing everyone just what it means to live in a society where the Media Improvement Act is law."

"Thank you."

"Before this roaming report began, there were probably many people who didn't know that television networks, publishers, and retail stores have no authority to resist censorship."



"Right now the only organization that has the right to resist censorship is the library. The 'Law of Library Freedom,' is it?"

"However, because of the pressures that existed when the Improvement Act was passed, its authority is limited to matters that involve the library. The details of its application can be supplemented by enforcement orders and by-laws as occasion demands, thus preserving at least some semblance of freedom of the press by fighting the arbitrary authority of the Media Improvement Act with the arbitrary authority of the Law of Library Freedom. But it was a mortifying setback for the faction who opposed the Media Improvement Act at the time, and hoped to pass a law that would completely neutralize its authority to oversee *all* media."

"I wonder what the world would be like today if such a law had been passed."

"To resolve the curious dilemma of the coexistence of two contradictory laws, both laws probably would have been repealed. But the Media Improvement Act was passed first, and its supporters were too vigilant; all that could be done was strengthen the existing Library Laws, which being administrative laws were under comparatively little scrutiny."

"I wish that first law had been passed--maybe then our station wouldn't be under a broadcast blackout tomorrow!"

"It would be nice if the Law of Library Freedom could extend to cover broadcasts as well... As you might expect, the enemy--oops, I shouldn't say 'enemy,' should I--as you might expect, the Improvement Committee was quick to secure their position, and as soon as the Improvement Act was passed, they issued enforcement orders that would keep us from getting involved."

"Unfortunately for us."

The reporter and Tedzuka Satoshi laughed together, and then the show cut to a commercial.

\*

"That man was born for public relations," Genda said, nodding vigorously along with the broadcast. "Still, the one who deserves the most thanks is you," he continued, turning to Orikuchi.

"Indeed," Orikuchi said with good grace. "But I think Touma's situation has sparked a sense of danger in everyone in the media industry; I didn't get nearly as much resistance as I was expecting."

There was the feeling that there would never be a better time to start a guerrilla broadcast and resist the Improvement Act. The fact that anti-Improvement Act factions are gaining power in government and political circles has been a big boost too. And for that we have Tedzuka-kun's extremely talented older brother to thank, for bringing together so many scattered moderate and anti-censorship factions and giving them a power base in the Justice Department. Without his unification efforts, I don't think the rest of the media would have been so quick to unite like this."

Though Orikuchi's assessment was entirely fair, Tedzuka scowled as if he didn't want to hear it.

"Come on, Tedzuka, you should at least acknowledge that your brother gets results." Iku prodded him.

Tedzuka's scowl deepened. "Shut up," he said, batting Iku's hand away.

For Iku, the cease-fire between Tedzuka Satoshi and the Library Force--and between the two brothers--had been a source of unalloyed joy. But apparently it was more complicated for the brothers themselves.

"How is Touma-sensei doing these days?" Orikuchi asked.

Doujou answered. "He's moved back to a guest room in the dorms; there's a bodyguard stationed in the adjacent room every day. Protecting him has become much easier now that we're not limited to choosing bodyguards from the Task Force; we can avail ourselves of the many talented people in the Defense Force. Lately his family has been able to visit and bring him some of his things; we have more breathing room in the shift schedule for the guard on his house as well. Touma-sensei himself has been concentrating on his writing."

"He used to joke that it would be nice to work right next door to a library...I guess he got his wish, in a way."

"We installed a terminal in his room where he can search the First Library's collection; he has Force members go and get the books he wants. Lately it's like his bodyguards have turned into his secretaries too--though there's a new one every day."

Incidentally, Iku had never played secretary and gone to fetch books for Touma. Her colleagues had told him that she would take too long to find them.

"He doesn't seem stressed, does he? He looked well when I saw him just now."

"Yes, he seems to be getting use to the rhythm of life here. And aside from assigning him his time slots for using the mess hall and the baths, we're trying to give him as much freedom as possible. We can't guess at what kind of stress he must be under, being at the center of this maelstrom, but..."

"That one will be fine as long as he can write. He's always been a bit out of touch with the rest of the world. Didn't he say that this episode is a rare experience, and that he's documenting all the details?"

On the TV screen, Tedzuka Satoshi's interview and the Terrorism and the Media Improvement Act Report was ending; after apologizing for the next day's broadcast blackout, the anchor moved on to the next news item.

"When does Touma-sensei's trial start?" Genda asked.

"Next week," Orikuchi replied. "He'll be the first to use the new trial system."

Orikuchi was referring to the new expert judge system that had been introduced last year, the 33rd year of the Seika era. Judges who oversaw civil suits and suits against the government, as well as governmental suits involving the General Act of National Taxes, were divided into specialties and became experts on those suits. The system aimed to drastically shorten trials.

"We've gathered plenty of evidence, and we've also garnered plenty of attention. As of next week, Touma-sensei's trial will be part of the Improvement Act Report. It'll give us an excuse to drag out the roaming report even longer."

"Well," Genda nodded imperiously, "that's a positive trend."  
Everyone laughed.

\*

The media began to send reporters to the Library Base, and it became difficult for the Improvement Special Agency to continue openly staking out the Base. It also wasn't going to be practical to abduct Touma from the Library Base using sheer numbers, so the Improvement Special Agency stepped down their surveillance of the Library Base and its environs.

Even so, the Library Force didn't let their guard down. They increased the watch on the gate and patrols within the grounds.

Since they weren't attempting to hide Touma's location anymore, members of the Library Task Force were allowed to have days off again. However, the state of emergency still hadn't been lifted, so Force members leaving the Base had to file their itineraries first (much like married Force members who lived in the dorms).

The day before Doujou's squad's day off, Komaki came up to Doujou in the office after work was done.

"Doujou, I'm going off-base tomorrow."

"Where are you going?"

"Someplace nearby. Maybe around here. Kichijyouji or Mitaka if we decide to go further. I'm just meeting up with Marié-chan."

"Got it. You don't have to be too specific about your itinerary, so just write your destination on the board."

Listening to them talk, Iku looked down at the daily report she was writing. "Lucky." The whispered word slipped out, too quietly for anyone else to hear.

*"...Well, I guess we'll have to save the movie for next time."*

That was what Doujou had said, when their outing that could not really be called a date had been interrupted by the current crisis.

He had also said, *"Okay, starting next time, we'll go Dutch."*

She couldn't bring herself to ask him if he remembered promising her a next time, and an outing together was unthinkable when trips off-base had to be reported and written up on the schedule board. Recognized relationships and friends of the same gender were one thing, but for a man and a woman who weren't even dating--and who were superior and subordinate!--to spend their day off together would be just begging for mockery. And Doujou *hated* to be the object of that kind of ridicule.

*If I confessed my love to him, what are the chances that he'd love me back?* she caught herself thinking foolishly.

*I love you. Will you go out with me?*

She wasn't uncomfortable with the idea of being the pursuer instead of the pursued, but... Iku buried her head in her hands. When she tried to picture how he would respond, she couldn't even *imagine* a positive outcome.

*All I get is a picture of him with a really blunt expression, going "...And?!"*

When she thought about it objectively, she felt like he had said and done various things that had given her hope in the past. The most recent had been the way he had held her hand in the darkness. The

way she had twined their fingers together, and the way he had responded in kind.

*Sure, something like that would give me hope in normal circumstances. But in my case, stuff like that only happens during extraordinary circumstances!*

Iku didn't have enough experience points to tell whether those incidents meant there was a chance her feelings were returned, or if they were nothing more than a superior officer lending support and comfort to a subordinate.

"Hey!" Doujou barked.

She jumped, and realized that Komaki had left the office. The entry "*Spending my day off around Musashi-sakai and Mitaka*" had been added to the schedule board in handsome characters.

"This may have slipped your mind, but I can't leave work until I sign off on your daily report, so..."

"I-I'm so sorry! Give me a second! I'm almost done!" Iku pressed her face close to the daily report form and filled it in hastily.

*Okay, I'm putting the whole thing on the back burner. It's not like I'll have time to think about frivolous stuff like this until the situation with Touma-sensei clears up, anyway.*

"Finished! Thank you for looking it over, sir!"

She handed him the report, and he checked it conscientiously before giving it his stamp of approval.

"I'm heading out! Good night!"

"Sure, get outta here."

Iku had left the office, and was just closing the door behind her, when she heard Doujou mutter to himself, "'Next time'...doesn't seem like it'll be anytime soon..."

He obviously didn't intend for Iku to hear him, and she was already out the door. She couldn't very well burst back in and demand an explanation.

*Why the hell would you say something like that, at a time like this!?! Are you trying to torture me!?!*

Her mind awlirl, Iku shut the door.

Still, assuming that he was talking about seeing a movie with her when he said "next time"...he hadn't been in an extraordinary situation when he said it. This might be the first incident she could actually feel comfortable taking a little bit of hope from.

\*

Komaki showed his ID to the guard, and left through the side gate.

Glancing up at the sky, he saw that the branches of the cherry trees that stretched over the gate were lightly tinted with pink. It was the color they turned before they began to bloom. It would be almost half a month before those tight little buds burst into flower.

*Is it really that time already?* he thought, putting the cherry trees behind him as he set out.

The roaming report had begun before Hinamatsuri, and it had been almost three weeks since then.

Touma had been under their protection for about two months, and during that time Komaki had barely seen Marié at all.

*"Sorry, things are going to be busy for a while"*

He had sent her a single text, back when the whole business had begun. Marié had written a single text in return.

*"All right. Be careful, 'kay?"*

Even when they occasionally ran into each other in the neighborhood around the library, all they could do was exchange smiles; there was no chance for proper conversation. Marié had graduated from high school last year but failed her college entrance exams. She had tried again this year, and this time had been accepted to her top choice. Her impaired hearing had affected her prep course work, and thus her top choice had not been within her abilities as a senior in high school. Apparently she had thought about lowering her sights, but considering the care that her condition would require during college, she decided that she really wanted to attend her top-choice school even if she had to take a year off to do it.

He hadn't even learned of her college acceptance from Marié herself; his mother had left him a message at the dorm. He had sent her a belated congratulatory text, and Marié had replied. Since Marié had a hearing impairment, they had difficulty understanding each other over the phone, but he also had no time to go and see her in person.

They had even put off celebrating her college acceptance. Despite that, he hadn't even gotten one disgruntled text from Marié.

*Considering what's going on, these days I'm in no fit state to see her anyway,* he thought, a bleak smile breaking over his face.

Komaki's status at Marié's house had undergone a subtle change while he wasn't looking. Before, Marié's mother would waylay him in

the entryway and chitchat with him, but lately she had stopped detaining him. Taking advantage of this treatment, he climbed the stairs to Marié's room on the second floor.

Because she was expecting him, she opened the door quickly when he knocked loudly on the door.

"I'm sorry it's been so long," he blurted out.

Marié laughed and shook her head. "I know things have been tough. I'm glad you're safe, Komaki-san."

After just two months of only seeing her infrequently, Marié already looked more grown-up than she had. Perhaps it was the knowledge that she was already twenty, and in April would be a college student.

"Do you have a bit more free time these days?"

"Yes--well, after a fashion. I still can't take vacation time, and we have to report where we're going on our days off." Komaki sat down on the bed as he spoke. Marié didn't try to join him, just spun around in her desk chair to face him.

At this show of restraint, Komaki stared at her, and Marié tilted her head. "What?"

"Nothing, it's just...you've gotten so levelheaded."

Marié must have known what he meant, for she blushed a little and smiled. "I'm trying not to whine as much about these things anymore. I don't want to upset the person who gave me my best weapon in an emergency." She was referring to the silver whistle she sported around her neck like a pendant. She had worn it every day since Komaki had given it to her.

*Dammit. She really has grown up.*

Komaki smiled vaguely and nodded, not knowing what to say.

"The reaction to the roaming report has been amazing. I don't know about anywhere else, but in this neighborhood, at least, it's all anyone can talk about. And I guess my dad's coworkers and clients discuss the Improvement Act on a daily basis. And it seems like the overwhelming majority of people oppose the Act. The signature-collecting campaigns are a million times more active than they were before the roaming report started--there's two of them, one to rethink the Improvement Act, and one to stop the persecution of Touma-sensei, and they're getting signatures in a bunch of ways. Around here, they're collecting signatures in front of the Kichijouji and Mitaka stations, and they're also accepting signatures by mail and on the internet."

Komaki already knew most of the things Marié was so earnestly telling him. The signature-collecting campaigns had gained a lot of momentum after the Library of Tomorrow Project had become their point of contact.

To outsiders who hadn't known the Library of Tomorrow Project before its massive policy change, the Library of Tomorrow Project was a transplanted Library Force organization that had been completely absorbed by the anti-censorship faction, and thus had sufficient credibility to collect signatures. To make it as easy as possible on the signatories, they would even take individual signatures, and collate them all into one nationwide list.

Naturally, this movement owed a great deal to Tedzuka Satoshi and his television appearance--as Genda had said, the man was born for public relations.

"But the pro-censorship factions are fighting back. They're handing out fliers and driving around sound trucks, saying that the anti-censorship faction is the radical one, and that the restrictions on Touma-sensei's writing are just temporary measures necessary for fighting terrorism." As Marié spoke, she picked up a folded sheaf of papers from her desk and handed it to Komaki. He unfolded it to find it was a collection of pro-censorship leaflets. They were pure censorship apologias, and had very little persuasive power in an era where the roaming report continued to be broadcast.

"They were given to my dad, who gave them to me. I didn't know, maybe the Library Force already has them, but..."

Of course the Library Force kept track of their opponent's movements. But Komaki was touched by her kindness, that she would go so far as to collect these leaflets in case they were of some use to him.

"And then, here are some anti-Improvement Act leaflets that were distributed to students during my entrance exams."

Next, Marié brought out a thin file folder. Its pocket was almost completely filled, and there was rich variety among the leaflets. Most of them, being student-made, were amateurish and full of radical themes. But at the very least, they were far more passionate than the pro-censorship leaflets.

"I don't usually travel very far, so I only have leaflets from around here," Marié said apologetically, her shoulders hunched. "But from what I can tell, the anti-Improvement Act's speeches and signature campaigns are totally having an effect. I went shopping with



my mother the other day, and we both signed the petition, but there were lots of people waiting in line."

"Thank you so much for researching all of this for me."

Though it was the first time they had been able to see each other in a long time, Marié was putting Komaki and his work before her own needs. It was the final proof that she was no longer a child.

"College seems like it's going to work out?"

"Yep, I picked a school that would keep providing me with a note-taker and stuff like that."

"Oh, that's good. Then we better celebrate today."

*And I want to thank you for caring so much about my work*, he added to himself. If even Marié, who admitted that her world was fairly small, could feel the change in society, the Library Force's tactics were working.

"Is there anything you want that I can get for you?"

There was, in fact, something she wanted from Komaki, but she was afraid to press for it.

Marié looked down, agonizing for a moment, then peeked back up at Komaki. "Umm...maybe it's wrong for me to be asking you for this, but...it doesn't have to be an expensive one, but I'd kind of like a ring. After I was accepted to that college, I've had to visit several times to hear about my note-taker and the facilities and systems they have for disabled people, and sometimes guys on campus try to chat me up...when I show them my hearing aid, most of them leave me alone, but I hate the way they always apologize after." Marié looked back down again. "I thought, maybe it wouldn't happen if I wore a ring on my left ring finger."

"Oh good, that's exactly what I wanted to get for you."

Marié's head jerked up, her expression brightening. "Really!?"

"Yep. I mean, you're in college now. I wanted to give you something so that other people could look at you and know."

"Yay! Back when I was in high school, I was so jealous of my friends who had boyfriends and wore matching rings!"

He smiled at the way she talked about high school as if it had been far in the past, though it had only been a year ago. She had clearly been serious about wanting to catch up to Komaki, and he wanted to give her something in recognition of her efforts.

Without her high school uniform and in regular clothes, no one would think of Marié as a child, and when she started college her world would become bigger than it had ever been before. Perhaps it was

selfish, but he wanted to put a tangible reminder of himself on her finger, so she'd think of him even in her new world.

"Then I think I'll get one for myself to match."

"Really!?" Marié's voice rose an octave. Asking for the ring had taken enough courage; she hadn't even dared to think about matching ones.

Almost immediately, though, she got a worried look on her face.

"But a pair of rings will cost twice as much!"

"Since I haven't been in touch with you much lately, and I still won't be able to see you much for the next while, I want to splurge. Anyway," he said, poking Marié on the forehead, "I'm not such a spendthrift that I need a twenty-year-old girl worrying about my solvency."

A little embarrassed to have her excessive anxiety pointed out, Marié stuck out her tongue.

"Well then, let's head towards the Isetan department store at Kichijouji. Unfortunately, I can't go anywhere too far away."

"Okay!" Marié said, bouncing to her feet. Since they had made plans to go out, Marié was more or less ready to go. Komaki waited for her to put on the white coat she often wore while visiting the library, and then stood up.

"Bye, Mom!" Marié called in the entryway, and walked out of the house. As they set out, their hands joined, so smoothly that neither could have said who made the first move.

\*

Spring had come late; it was the end of March, but only about a fifth of the cherry blossoms were in bloom.

Most people in the street were still wearing down coats the day Touma's suit against the Media Improvement Committee was heard in a Tokyo district court. Touma's allegation was that the Improvement Committee was violating his freedom of expression, a right guaranteed by Article 21 of the Constitution.

At the district court level, trials were usually presided over by one judge, but due to the extraordinary circumstances of this one, a panel of three judges presided.

Touma was the plaintiff, and the Media Improvement Committee was the defendant, but only their representatives appeared in court.

Essentially, it was a legal battle between the anti-Improvement-Act faction and the pro-Improvement-Act faction.

Touma's side offered up evidence that the Improvement Special Agency had tried to abduct Touma, as well as the hundreds of thousands of signatures they had gathered supporting him. During oral proceedings, they argued that enforcement orders that could restrict citizens' freedom to write or lead to their confinement violated their freedom of speech, and were therefore unconstitutional and invalid. They argued that the treatment Touma had endured thanks to that enforcement order was illegal, and that it should be stopped immediately.

The Media Improvement Committee's side argued that Touma's work was dangerous, as it had possibly been used as a reference by the terrorists who attacked the Tsuruga reactor, and that restrictions on freedom of speech for the sake of public welfare were unavoidable and did not violate the constitution. They also mentioned that the orders having to do with Touma holding off on writing for the time being had come straight from the Prime Minister's situation room.

The new trial system meant that the trial proceeded speedily. The roaming report continued to be broadcast, and it continued to captivate the citizenry.

And then, when the cherry trees had lost their blossoms and had leafed out, a verdict was reached--faster than anyone had anticipated, new trial system or not.

The judicial panel had ruled against the plaintiff.

Amidst a massive outcry from the citizenry, Touma's legal team immediately filed an appeal.

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"I know that the chances of winning a suit against the government are low, but..." Orikuchi, who was visiting the Task Force office, heaved a sigh. "This case involved the government coming within inches of blatantly violating the constitution. I didn't think they'd rule against us so *quickly*."

"Even the *barbershop* case ended in a settlement..." Iku muttered, her shoulders drooping.

She was talking about the case Kousaka Daichi had been involved in, in which the Tokyo Metropolitan Barbershop/Hairdresser Trades Association sued the Media Improvement Committee. A settlement had

been reached, in which the use of the word *barber* would be only lightly restricted, and the Association would be consulted before any media was seized because it used the word *barber*.

Shibasaki, who had made an appearance as usual, bit the nail of her thumb with a snap. "The team is prepared to take this case all the way to the Supreme Court, correct?"

"Of course," Orikuchi nodded. "It's just...this verdict. I can't say it's filled us with joy."

"Is Touma-sensei okay?" Iku asked.

Orikuchi shook her head from side to side. "It's made him scared, as you would expect. His wife and son came with me today, so I thought I'd give them some time together as a family. They've already heard the explanation from the legal team."

"Haven't you heard anything from my brother?" Tedzuka asked Shibasaki.

"According to him, there are a number of 'flexible' politicians who are joining the anti-Improvement Act faction as a bid for popularity with the citizenry. But there's still a core group of Improvement Act supporters who will never be swayed, and there are pro-Improvement Act factions in every political party. With the support of those factions, the Improvement Committee has spent the last thirty years turning the Justice Department into a hotbed of corruption, so they've had plenty of time to get *very good* at what they do. They've wormed their way into legal circles, and in particular, they've maneuvered to install a high concentration of judges who support the Improvement Act in the district courts, so that any suits involving the Improvement Act are defeated in the first round."

"What do you mean, 'very good at what they do'? Like they deserve a pat on the back for it!"

"Fine, fine. Don't get hung up on a little slip of the tongue," Shibasaki said lightly, and continued. "The anti-Improvement Act factions only started gaining momentum recently, and mostly due to your brother's efforts to bring them together. Even though they can make their voices heard, apparently they're still not sure what they should be *doing*, practically. And most of your brother's suggestions are defensive, not offensive. Right now, your brother is looking hard at the Supreme Court; apparently he's trying to arrange things so that in

the worst case, the case will be heard by a petit bench<sup>5</sup> consisting of two pro-Improvement Act judges, two anti-Improvement Act judges, and one moderate judge... I think he may have the perseverance to make it all the way to the Supreme Court."

"But what will we do if the grand bench hears the case?"

The question came from Orikuchi. Since the case involved constitutionality, it was possible that it would be heard by a panel of all fifteen judges of the Supreme Court.

Shibasaki shrugged mildly. "He said if that happens, there's nothing to do but leave it in the hands of fate. If the entire Supreme Court is involved, all we can do is pray that they won't rule Touma's treatment constitutionally valid."

Tedzuka Satoshi was gifted, but even his machinations couldn't affect the entire Supreme Court. Not even Tedzuka could fault him for this, and he settled back silently with a scowl.

"But if the case gets that big, it'll be just as hard for the pro-Improvement Act faction to manipulate the outcome. The enemy is just as eager for this to be decided in a normal court as we are," Komaki put in.

Doujou said, "Also, while the people closest to the case are understandably disheartened by this verdict, it'll only fire up their supporters more."

He turned on the television in the office, flipping through the channels until he found the one that was broadcasting the roaming report that day. They were doing man-on-the-street interviews about the verdict on Touma's case.

*"I'm having a hard time believing this ruling." (Corporate worker, male, 25)*

*"It's a disgrace on our whole nation. Deplorable." (Corporate worker, male, 42)*

*"The ruling tramples all over the constitution, which guarantees our rights as citizens. If our courts have issued such a ruling, the Justice Department must be rotten to the core." (Undergraduate law major, female, 21)*

*"Japan's turning into a socialist country...if it isn't one already. I mean, this ruling, man..." (Freeter, male, 20)*

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<sup>5</sup> The Supreme Court of Japan consists of fifteen justices. From Wikipedia: "It renders decisions from either a grand bench of fifteen justices or a petit bench of five. The grand bench is required for cases involving constitutionality."

"It seems like a very one-sided ruling." (Self-employed, male, 51)

The camera then cut to a female reporter, who was pointing a microphone toward a young man in his mid-twenties. A caption beneath his face read "Oota Junichi-san, who participated in the signature campaign (26)".

"Oota-san, how do you feel about this verdict?"

"I don't have the words to describe how I feel. Still, we can't give up. This oppression threatens the freedom of expression of every citizen in this country. We citizens have some things to reflect on regarding the hidden oppression that we didn't notice until now, but the greater blame rests on this country, which has been oppressing people in secret. This isn't just Touma-sensei's problem anymore. We're still taking signatures, so if you have a heart, please lend us your support."

The screen displayed the addresses where one could send signatures, and then the camera cut back to the studio.

Suddenly Tedzuka scowled. Tedzuka Satoshi was in the studio. Ever since the first time he had appeared as a commentator, he had been in high demand on the Improvement Act reports due to his knowledge, clear explanations, and, as Genda had said, the fact that he looked good on camera.

"...If he keeps getting carried away and appearing on all these shows, won't he become a target for pro-Improvement Act groups? The Library of Tomorrow Project *did* used to have a connection to the pro-Improvement Act faction. If that's leaked, won't it undermine the anti-Improvement Act faction?"

"Worried about your brother?" Genda teased.

Tedzuka glared at him. "I'm worried that we'll have problems because of him!"

"Relax. When we joined forces, we put all our cards on the table. If the Improvement Committee tries to attack your brother over the connections he used to have, he can play a card so powerful that the Improvement Act will be repealed that very day. Your brother was completely serious about his plan to bring about the downfall of the Improvement Act over the course of decades."

"What card...?"

Tedzuka was sulkily refusing to ask the question, so Iku did it for him.

"Tedzuka Satoshi has disassembled the black box in which the Improvement Act was enacted. He knows who caused such a preposterous law to be passed, for what purpose, and by what means."

"Then why doesn't he publicize it!?" Tedzuka snapped. "Then this farce of a trial would be..."

"Think of that card as a nuclear bomb with a blast radius of 500 kilometers. It'll destroy the Improvement Act--but it'll also destroy your brother, the Library Force, the current political map, and the current cabinet. There are things in this world so dark that they destroy whoever touches them. Nagatachou<sup>6</sup> is like a minefield full of those things, and your brother found a nuclear mine there. So the pro-Improvement Act faction isn't going to make a public move against Tedzuka Satoshi. There's no way he hasn't stored the information somewhere simple, so that if something happens to him, that mine gets set off for the world to see. That's also why your brother still hasn't been assassinated yet, despite all his time in the public eye."

The room froze at his casual use of the word "assassinated."

"...Is the Library Force aware of the content of this 'bomb'?" Doujou asked.

"No. I don't think even Advisor Inamine knows. It's not like the Library Force was established through the most virtuous means either. If this bomb was set off carelessly, it could endanger the very meaning of the library's existence--because it's affiliated with an organization like the Library Force. Anyway, I've only heard a little bit about this, from Tedzuka Satoshi. He said that in the end, after the explosion, both sides could be crippled or annihilated. It's best not to ask too much about such dangerous things. But still, thanks to the nuclear mine Tedzuka Satoshi is carrying, this trial is at least being played out on a fair game board. Right now, the people who care the most about Tedzuka Satoshi's health and safety are the Media Improvement Committee and their supporters," Genda said, smiling wickedly. "It was because he was carrying such a devastating bomb that Tedzuka Satoshi accepted the idea of temporary restrictions on the Law of Library Freedom and avoided short-term strategies. He laughed when he said his change of plans was due to Joan of Arc twisting his arm."

Everyone looked at Shibasaki, who smiled angelically.

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<sup>6</sup> The district in Tokyo that contains the Diet and the Prime Minister's residence. Used figuratively to refer to the government as a whole.

On the television screen, Tedzuka Satoshi was answering the anchor's questions.

"Tetzuka-san, how do you feel about this verdict?"

"Though I wouldn't go so far as to call it unjust, I can say without reservations that it is quite biased."

"What do you mean by 'biased'?"

"The Media Improvement Committee's position is that the restrictions against Touma are only temporary, 'until we know the full story of the terrorist attack.' But these 'temporary restrictions' don't have an expiration date. The wording of the orders that came out of the Prime Minister's situation room doesn't imply a concrete time limit either. To take this to its logical extreme, they could insist on calling anything from ten minutes to a year to ten years 'temporary.' Considering the Media Improvement Committee's history of heavy-handedness, it's quite likely that they would have no problem doing so.

"In the first place, ever since the Cold War ended and we entered this age of terrorist networks, 'knowing the full story' of any terrorist attack has become impossible, as any expert could tell you. It's impossible to point to one terrorist action and identify its ringleader and objective. The objective of modern-day terrorism has been summarized as 'throwing the international community into disarray.' There's no point in investigating why a certain target or location was chosen. The only reason you're going to get is that Japan came up on the list of countries some terrorist network could target to raise its profile. And for the first time, it was Japan's turn to be attacked. That's it.

"Terror networks don't have formal organization. They consist of various groups with different goals, different races, and different methods--these groups simply cooperate to a certain extent. A policy that requires 'knowing the full story' will only earn us derision from the international community. This has already been pointed out by the police, the Self-Defense Forces, and the other keepers of the peace, but a terrorist group's goal is psychological shock, not physical damage. Their goal is to cause chaos and fear in society, causing us to abandon our principles and fall into traps of our own making.

"Thus, even when faced with the menace of the Tsuruga reactor terrorist attack--"

Tetzuka Satoshi paused, and the camera zoomed in on his face.



"We must not give in to the menace of terrorism, and amend the constitution that preserves our democratic government--for that is exactly what the terrorists want, and the international community will snigger at us for it. As for this verdict, it wouldn't be an exaggeration to call it a clever way to implement an indefinite restriction on freedom of expression."

"He gets an A-plus," Genda declared as Tedzuka Satoshi's segment ended and that day's coverage of the Improvement Act began.

For a while after the roaming report began, the stations had kept up the pretense of covering both sides of the argument. But television had a powerful effect on public opinion, and the Improvement Act camp was having a hard time maintaining their usual hard-line stance. Their public relations office was constantly issuing weak, noncommittal explanations.

However, if they stopped talking to reporters, the anti-Improvement Act camp would have a monopoly on press coverage, so they had to say *something*. It was a tough position. Even though there were citizens who expressed the opinion "if that's what has to be done to protect us from terrorism, so be it" during their man-on-the-street interviews, no one expressed positive feelings for the Media Improvement Act as a whole. Their situation was not good.

The roaming report had only increased the backlash against the Improvement Act.

After Tedzuka Satoshi left the screen and the rest of the comparatively humdrum report came on, the television was left on but no one watched. Something halfway between a gossip session and a meeting had begun instead.

"Should we be trying to force a compromise by making them commit to a time limit for the 'temporary restrictions'?" Tedzuka asked.

Genda shook his head. "Even if we get a time limit out of them, they'll hem and haw and delay and delay. We're aiming for nothing less than a complete legal victory."

The question was whether or not they could achieve that victory, either in appeals court or the Supreme Court.

"If we can't get that victory, I guess we'll play Tedzuka's brother's trump card, and be prepared for a 500 kilometer explosion,"

Genda said, a little too cavalier about the whole idea. "It might be best to level the whole place and start fresh."

"Well, right now our legal team is working very hard to make sure that doesn't happen, so I'd appreciate it if you didn't start Armageddon early," Orikuchi said wryly. "Our strategy is to use the district court case and the appeals court case to consolidate our foothold and chase down the opposition. Public opinion is increasingly on our side. There's no reason we shouldn't be able to turn this verdict around in the end."

However, if she had really been confident, she wouldn't have used the word "should."

\*

The appeals court reached its verdict during the rainy season.<sup>7</sup> Compared to the district court's verdict, one could call this one a step forward--a very small step.

The verdict put a five-year time limit on the defendant's "temporary restrictions until the full story of the Tsuruga reactor attack is known."

The general public praised it as a more favorable verdict than the first one. But for the Library Force, it was a more disheartening result.

As Genda had already pointed out, they couldn't trust that the five-year time limit would actually be adhered to.

Waiting until public opinion had forgotten about the case and then manufacturing reasons to extend the time limit was the Media Improvement Committee's forte. It was quite doubtful that the current frenzy of anti-Improvement Act feelings could last that long in the political world and public opinion.

Furthermore, the problem wasn't only Touma's fate. Riding on the momentum of snatching Touma's legal victory from the jaws of defeat, there were plans to gather allies and bring a civil suit questioning the Media Improvement Act's legality and constitutionality.

But the courts were blatantly trying to put out that spark before it burst into flame. Touma's legal team expressed dissatisfaction with the verdict and appealed to the Supreme Court, but many were of the opinion that the appeals court's verdict was victory enough. And it was

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<sup>7</sup> In Tokyo, June or July.

an understandable opinion, for those who were unaware of the Media Improvement Act's dark side.

Tedzuka Satoshi was apparently hard at work trying to maneuver within the Department of Justice, but the alliances between anti-Improvement Act factions were too new, and for the most part he did not meet with success.

As for the pro-Improvement Act faction, they had spent thirty years increasing their power via behind-the-scenes maneuvering. They would probably aim for a compromise during the Supreme Court trial: reduce the five-year time limit to two or three years. There wasn't enough time before the trial to make the public understand how corrupted the Media Improvement Act was.

"It sure would have been nice to get something done while the roaming report has everyone's attention..." Genda muttered. He had appropriated equipment for his rehabilitation and basically moved back onto the base.

Tedzuka Satoshi, who had become the de-facto leading commentator on the Improvement Act, was still persistently pointing out its incompatibilities with the constitution, but he had to watch what he said--if he delved too deeply into the Improvement Act, he might brush up against the "thermonuclear bomb with a 500-kilometer blast radius."

"Before the Supreme Court makes its decision, let's plan some realistic counter-measures in case we lose!"

Thus it came to pass that an all-hands meeting of the Library Task Force was convened, during a time when Shibasaki and Orikuchi were free too. By this point, everyone in the Force had somehow guessed that Shibasaki was the one in communication with the top brass, and the Force members welcomed that fact warmly.

*"Next to her, Kasahara looks downright ugly,"* said some, who should have kept their mouths shut.

"I have a question!" Iku said, raising her hand.

"Bring it on!" Genda said, pointing, as if they were opponents in a wrestling match.

"Shouldn't the top brass be coming up with these counter-measures?"

"Of course the top brass is coming up with ideas too! But sometimes recommendations from those on the ground can cut through all the bullshit. If that inflexible Commander Hikoe is leading

the discussion, they're only going to come up with inflexible ideas, after all!"

"Advisor Inamine is also part of the debate, so I think he'll help balance things out..." Ogata piped up to contradict him.

Genda waved a hand impatiently. "Ever since Commander Hikoe came to power, there's been a definite bias in human resources in favor of governmentals. No matter how hard Advisor Inamine tries, he's never going to get that discussion on a flexible and creative track. So we're going to help them out with some recommendations from the ground."

Next to Iku, Doujou rubbed his forehead mournfully. "Don't count on it," he warned.

Not even Iku was naïve enough to swallow Genda's irrational logic whole. "I know that much," she snapped, pursing her lips in a pout.

"What if we withdrew the suit just before the decision came out?"

"What if, in the middle of the Supreme Court trial, we brought a suit challenging the constitutionality of the Media Improvement Act?"

"They trespassed on Advisor Inamine's property even though he's retired from the Force, so let's have him sue the state for reparations."

"What if we had Touma-sensei make the Library Base his official residence?"

"Then he might as well enlist in the Library Force."

Force members called out ideas as they occurred. Shibasaki repeatedly called the legal department to check which were possible--no point in discussing the impossible ones. The questions ranged from the comparatively straightforward to the ridiculous; it was a calamitous day for the legal department.

They talked and shouted until they were worn out, and the meeting segued into a tea break, with everyone making tea for themselves. Doujou's squad was endorsing the idea of challenging the constitutionality of the Media Improvement Act in a separate suit during the Supreme Court trial, based on the way the Barbershop Trades Association's suit during the Kousaka Daichi *barber* incident had been an effective flanking attack.

This raised the question of whether an additional suit for state reparations by Advisor Inamine would be an effective two-pronged attack, which Doujou and Komaki were still enthusiastically debating.

Iku, who had been totally useless during the discussion so far and had only listened, sipped her tea and muttered with no particular purpose, "If it goes to the Supreme Court and the verdict doesn't protect his freedom of speech, maybe it would be better for Touma to seek asylum in some other country."

Iku was oblivious as the others fell silent around her.

Noticing that the sound of herself slurping tea was unexpectedly loud, she looked up--

"Huh!?"

The attention of the whole room was fixed upon her.

"What? What? What did I say?"

Doujou dropped his hands onto her shoulders with a *thump*.

"...Say that again."

"Wait, did I say something wrong...?"

"It doesn't matter, just say that again."

Doujou's eyes were deadly serious.

"I'm sorry, I don't know what I did, but I'm sorry! I apologize!"

"I'm not going to get angry with you, just say that again, dammit!!"

"What are you talking about, you're already angry!!"

Here Komaki broke in. "Doujou, stop, you sound like you're interrogating her," he said, subduing Doujou with quiet dignity. He turned to Iku with a smile. "Now, you said something a moment ago, about Touma-sensei."

"Uh..."

*Shit, did I say something rash?* Komaki was smiling gently at her, but the way everyone's attention was on her made her afraid, and the way Doujou was staring at her was the most fearsome of all. Even Shibasaki and Orikuchi were--

"I'm sorry, I said it without thinking, it just slipped out of my mouth accidentally..."

"And I'm telling you to say that thing that slipped out of your mouth accidentally one more time, *what is so goddamn difficult about that, you idiot!?*" Doujou shouted, out of patience.

Bracing herself for the censure of everyone around her, Iku raised her voice. "I think I said something like, if this is the kind of country where the Supreme Court won't hand down a favorable verdict on this case, maybe it would be better for Touma-sensei to seek asylum somewhere else!"

She hunched down, expecting Doujou's fist to descend, when--

"That's the best idea I've heard all day," Genda said, grinning audibly.

"Attagirl, good job coming up with such a good idea with that brain of yours. Why the hell were you so afraid to say it?" Doujou said, shaking her shoulder, his sudden good cheer sharply contrasting with his behavior a moment ago.

Hearing Doujou praise her so openly, Iku's eyes filled with tears and she glared at him.

*...If I said something so praiseworthy, why--*

"Did you really have to interrogate me like that!?"

"You were the one at fault, Doujou," Komaki said, and everyone around them nodded in agreement--which just made the sulking Doujou more sulky.

"Even if I was...what kind of girl punches me after that? Punches me!"

Iku's fist had snapped out at the same time as her outcry. It had caught Doujou on the left cheek, which had swelled up immediately.

"Officer Doujou, here's a fresh towel."

Doujou took the towel Tedzuka offered. The cold towel still stung the bruise on his face, and he twitched involuntarily.

"Still, Doujou-kun, you weren't exactly lavish with your praise," Orikuchi prodded him mockingly. "She came up with such a good idea--you shouldn't have said what you said about her brain."

"The way you questioned her was pretty intimidating too," Komaki added.

Doujou grumbled. "But who would have thought that Kasahara would have come up with such a sophisticated plan?"

"Well, it did kind of feel like she hit the bulls-eye with a wild shot," Komaki observed dispassionately. "But still, a hit is a hit. You need to praise your subordinates and help them grow."

*If a subordinate who never contributes to meetings suddenly bursts out with a bulls-eye of an idea, isn't it a more natural human reaction to get excited and press her for details?* He grumbled excuses to himself, but didn't speak them aloud, fearing the likely concentrated fire of everyone around him.

He flicked his eyes up at the closed door of the commander's office. Iku was barricaded in the room with Shibasaki, who was much better than Doujou at pacifying Iku.

"You're both so young," Genda boomed out, flipping idly through a newspaper. "In any case, we're taking a break until Kasahara's mood improves. We can't continue the meeting without the person who's made the best contribution. While you've got the time, go and buy cake to get back in our good graces. Get enough for everyone."

"What, *everyone!*?"

He raised his voice in irritation as he hadn't done since he was a new recruit, and then color flooded his face. *How old am I!*? As Doujou collapsed on the desk with a bang, Tedzuka delivered the killing blow.

"I know their favorite bakery. If you like, I can come with you and help."

"...How much for a slice?"

"Oh, it's their favorite because it's cheap but tasty. The most expensive ones are only about 400 yen."

Still, if he had to get cake for fifty people, that was 20,000 yen.

"Oh, and since I hate sweets, can you get me something salty? Rice crackers or fried mochi or something like that."

"Could you get me some *wagashi*?"

As the uninvited orders began to fly in, Doujou's face darkened and he shouted, "Those who want cake, raise your hands! I'm getting a box of assorted rice crackers for the rest of you!"

In the commander's office, Iku sat sobbing with a box of tissues on her lap.

"Why...! Why did I have to go and *punch* him...?"

"No, I don't think you were the one at fault there. The rest of us were also wondering why he was suddenly cross-examining you."

"But a woman who punches him...! What must he think!? What if he hates meeeee?"

"Look, it's going to be fine. If he was going to start hating you over something like this, he'd have done it already. Think about his past behavior! Your acquaintance started with you drop-kicking him in the back, after all!"

"Oh my god, I did that too, didn't I!" Iku flailed.

Shibasaki continued smoothly. "Actually, punching him in that situation actually shows your true worth, or your essence, or something like that. If a teary-eyed woman slaps a man at a time like that, it just makes everyone sad and uncomfortable. A punch makes everyone laugh and defuses the situation. You have a natural talent for balancing seriousness with humor."

"I don't want that kind of talent!"

"What was more interesting to me, though," Shibasaki said, leaning forward toward Iku, "was the miracle of you coming up with such a great way out of a hopeless situation."

"...Did I really say something that amazing?"

Iku's understanding of the situation was lagging behind, as no one had yet explained what had been so remarkable about her idea.

"It was amazing. Well, it might have been a once-in-a-lifetime miracle, but the fact that it happened now was amazing."

Shibasaki's compliment was a little left-handed.

"Everyone was trying to figure out how to settle the problem within the bounds of our national laws. And then suddenly you came up with this global strategy."

"Seeking asylum is a global strategy?"

"Sure is. Think about it--an author who is highly regarded in his home country, and could probably teach a course in crisis management to the police or the Ministry of Defense, says 'Japan can't guarantee my freedom of speech so I'm seeking asylum' and flees a country that ostensibly values democracy to another democratic country. Japan's international standing would plummet. The censorship of the Media Improvement Act isn't known among the advanced nations as being comparable to censorship in socialist societies--it's sometimes criticized, but not often, because other countries don't want to interfere--but the story will change if an author who was oppressed by the Improvement Act flees the country. It depends on where he seeks asylum, but many developed countries will take the opportunity to demand, 'Why is an author in a democratic nation under so much governmental pressure that he has to flee the country?' It'll blast holes in the Improvement Act."

"But--but--" Iku stopped and shuddered. "Can he actually flee and seek asylum? From one democratic country to another?"

One often heard of refugees from one political system fleeing to another. But Japan was ostensibly a democracy.

"We won't know until we try," Shibasaki admitted easily. "But the other advanced democratic nations hate anything that reeks of socialism, and Touma-sensei has not yet been charged with any criminal offenses. Even America, with whom we have an extradition treaty, wouldn't readily hand over an author embroiled in a situation like this--they value freedom too much."



As Iku understood it, there was no precedent, so they wouldn't know if it would work until they tried, but they had high hopes.

"Newspapers in other countries sometimes carry stories about the Media Improvement Act. I've even seen scathing criticism calling Japan a 'half-democratic half-socialist chimera.' The Soviet Union may have collapsed, but the democratic world still has a severe allergy to socialism. International opinion should side heavily with Touma-sensei."

Now they just had to come up with a plan.

As Shibasaki finished her explanation, someone knocked a little meekly on the door to the commander's office.

"Come in!" Shibasaki called, without consulting Iku first. Iku hastily wiped her face with a tissue.

Doujou awkwardly poked his head in. "Have you just about calmed down yet?"

"Yes sir, um..." *I'm sorry for punching you*, Iku tried to apologize, but Doujou raised a hand to halt her.

"I'm sorry. It was all my fault. Don't say a word."

Shibasaki was watching their exchange with great amusement.

"So...there's cake from a bakery you guys like, so come on out. Kasahara, you get first pick, okay."

"Oooh, then I get second pick!" Shibasaki sang out at once.

Doujou checked her before she got carried away. "Orikuchi-san gets second pick--guests first! You can have third pick."

"Whaaat? But I'm the one who's been comforting Kasahara all this time after you made her cry!"

Doujou's shoulders slumped visibly, so Iku hastily rose. Shibasaki's amusement was palpable.

\*

"Whoa!"

There were four of the largest cake boxes, and they were stuffed to the gills with a variety of cake slices. They bulged open across the ugly office desks. Next to them were two boxes of assorted rice crackers, for Force members who didn't like sweets.

"Wow...it's like a dream come true..."

*I could have never done this on my salary.* The thought snapped her out of her captivation, and she looked at Doujou.

"Um...Did you...?"

Before Doujou could answer, Genda boomed out a hearty laugh.

"He got his just deserts! Better than docking his pay, eh!"

"I'm sorry, Instructor, I..."

"It's fine, okay? Which one do you want?"

Doujou, who appeared to have learned his lesson, held a paper plate and disposable fork, ready to serve.

"Hmm, well then..."

After careful consideration, Iku chose a double-layer mousse with a muscat grape and cherry compote on top.

Doujou had a hard time trying to serve her with the fork. "It's okay if I pick it up by the plastic film?" he asked Iku, and transferred it onto her plate.

He struggled as he served Orikuchi her gâteau au chocolat, and Shibasaki her plain layered cheesecake, and when he was done he announced a little desperately, "Everyone else, serve yourselves!"

"What!? I thought you were going to serve everyone!"

"It would waste half the day!" Doujou said sullenly.

Force members swarmed over the cake and crackers, not bothering with serving utensils but grabbing the delicate cakes with their bare hands. They tore off the plastic film left and right, and ate the cakes right out of their hands.

"There are plates and forks right here!" Doujou lectured them.

The older Force members paid him no heed. "You got to use them for the women, so it's fine, right?"

"Calm down, I'll use a plate and fork, okay?"

"I would like to as well, sir."

Komaki and Tedzuka were obviously trying to be supportive, as Genda called out tactlessly, "But these are bite-sized!"

"That's just you, Commander! Couldn't you try and savor yours a little?" Doujou complained.

"I did savor mine! I think it tasted kind of like strawberry..."

It was the best he was going to get from the tyrannical Genda.

"Alright, now that Kasahara is in a better mood, we can resume."

Genda's wording made Iku look down uncomfortably--and Doujou even more uncomfortably.

*Dammit, maybe I did something unkind to him, in more than one way.* The thought paradoxically gave Iku a little relief from her own embarrassment.

"Orikuchi, how did Touma-sensei feel about they asylum idea?"

"I just presented it to him, just as an idea...it seemed like as long as he didn't have to renounce his nationality, he wasn't too opposed to the idea. He's good with languages, and he's had to go overseas many times to gather information, so he wouldn't have many communication problems in an English-speaking country. Apparently he and his wife had thought about emigrating to another country when they got older, so if he thinks of it as just moving that timeline up a little, he wouldn't mind at all--that was the impression I got. He'd still have to hammer out the specifics among his family."

"Well, it's possible that he won't actually have to flee the country, if we make a lot of noise about how he wants to seek asylum and there's an international outcry. Japan is susceptible to political pressure from other countries, and America will be especially vocal if there are accusations of socialism afoot."

Iku remembered what Tedzuka Satoshi had said, the night they met.

*"Other countries don't publicly speak out against it, since it's a limited-scale war and they don't want to interfere in our internal affairs...But for all practical purposes, Japan is experiencing armed civil strife. It's a pretty sorry state for a democratic society to be in."*

If that were true, then if they were given the motivation, foreign countries would be falling over themselves to criticize Japan. Even if it weren't, Westerners were sensitive when it came to human rights. They would be deeply interested in the story of an author so oppressed by his own country that he had no choice but to seek asylum elsewhere.

"We might even be able to use this opportunity to reduce the reach of the Improvement Act."

Iku couldn't help but be dumbfounded that her carelessly muttered idea had snowballed into something like this.

"The first thing we should do is call for cooperation from the International Federation of Library Associations. Wherever he flees to, it would smooth things over at their embassy if an organization within their own country sounded them out first."

The International Federation of Library Associations (IFLA), was, as the name suggested, a worldwide library federation. About 150 countries from all over the world were members, including Japan, of course. Its headquarters was in The Hague in the Netherlands.

"We need to arrange for the Japan Library Association to urgently get in touch with headquarters, and ask them to draw up a list of

countries that would cooperate with a request for asylum. Tedzuka, can you get in touch directly with the president? I want to waste as little time on formalities as possible."

"Yes, sir." Tedzuka rose and left the room.

"I can't believe that this has already gotten so big that we're asking IFLA for help," Iku whispered to herself.

Doujou smiled wryly. "That's funny, coming from the one who unthinkingly came up with the biggest idea."

Iku's cheeks reddened and she lowered her head. She hadn't thought that her idea would turn into such a serious matter.

"We haven't gotten any cooperation from IFLA in our battle against the Improvement Act, have we?"

"They may have an imposing name, but it's not like they actually have any right to intervene substantially in any country's affairs. Just like the Japan Library Association doesn't actually have the right to intervene in the library's affairs. Anyway, it's a nongovernment organization--leaving aside internal library affairs, there's not much that an international organization can do about a law that affects a single country like the Improvement Act. Though every so often they do criticize it as regrettable, as it goes against the Statement on Libraries and Intellectual Freedom that IFLA has adopted. However," Doujou said, his expression tightening, "they should be willing to cooperate with us in this case. Well done," he said, not looking Iku.

"Thank you, sir," she said, not looking at him.

After Tedzuka returned, they worked out the plan. When the meeting was over, they had decided to pursue the (possibly sham) request for asylum, as well as bringing two suits before the court--one challenging the Improvement Act, one from Inamine suing for state reparations--as a two-pronged attack.

"Well, then, I'll go deliver this right away!" Shibasaki hastily drew up a summary of their plan, and left the office.

"Everyone who participated: I'm swearing you to secrecy about this plan, especially the asylum part of it!"

And with that, Genda closed the meeting. It ended on a completely different note than the hopeless one it had begun on.

"So, what'd the brass say about it?"

"They ate it up."

They were talking in their room after dinner. Shibasaki had taken the proposal to the brass, and Iku had wanted to ask her about her impressions, but after the meeting Iku had training drills, and they hadn't crossed paths before now.

"When I told him that you had come up with the idea, Commander Hikoe looked like he had mixed feelings about it."

"Why would he have mixed feelings...?"

"Well, you do have a long history with Commander Hikoe and the governmentalsists."

Needless to say, she was talking about the inquest that had been opened after Iku was set up by the Library of Tomorrow Project.

"Thinking about it, you have history and connections with a lot of different groups."

"You make it sound like I've been doing something wrong!"

"But apparently when Tedzuka Satoshi joined forces with the Library Force, he acknowledged that he'd set you up, and this suggestion of yours should work in your favor during employee evaluation and rating. If you don't screw up too badly in the future, you'll certainly be getting at least one *camomille*."

Iku didn't understand what Shibasaki was talking about for a moment. When she realized, she almost fell on her face.

"You--You mean I'll be able to become be a Library Officer Third Class!?"

"You might even expect to become one within the year. Wouldn't that be something? After you were bawling to Tedzuka and me about how we'd still be friends even if our ranks were different, you'll probably end up as the same rank as us anyway."

Of course this woman didn't have any doubts about her and Tedzuka's ability to pass another promotion exam--but Iku's thoughts were soaring as well.

*It's incredible--just incredible. I made it. I'm going to be the same rank Instructor Doujou was eight years ago.*

*Maybe...maybe I can tell him. I'm not just a good-for-nothing subordinate anymore, I've grown up a bit--so maybe I can tell Instructor Doujou that I love him.*

Just imagining it made her face burn, so she quickly changed the subject.

"What did Touma-sensei think?"

"Ah, well, since he had already had thoughts about emigrating after he retired, he's pretty calm about the whole thing. Even if it

turned out he really did have to flee the country and turn over his house to his son, he said it wouldn't bother him. He said his wife could follow him when he was settled."

"It might just be me, but...I feel like usually someone would hesitate a little before deciding something like this."

"Sure, but remember, he's an author, so maybe he's already really fed up with Japan," Shibasaki pointed out.

It made Iku remember what Touma had said, while he had been sheltered at Inamine's house. He had spoken of voluntary restraints that had been in place since before the Media Improvement Act was passed. Touma had been writing for that long--it was perfectly possible that he had had enough of Japan.

"Touma-sensei told me once--he got letters from readers telling him that '*katateochi*<sup>8</sup>' was a discriminatory word."

"Are you kidding me? Didn't they own a dictionary?" Shibasaki dismissed the critique with a snarl. "Or do they want to add a third definition under *katateochi*'s entry in the dictionary? 'Number three: discriminatory word.' All I can see is someone on the lookout for things they can add to the list of discriminatory words. If I'd been dealing with idiots like that for more than thirty years, I'd be fed up too."

"Am I the only one who feels like it's the people pointing these words out who are the malicious ones?"

"That's the thing, Kasahara." Shibasaki pour more tea into Iku's mug. "It's not their malice that he's tired of--it's their sense of righteousness."

\*

In point of fact it would be an emigration--and an emigration would get plenty of attention for their purposes--but the Library Force was always fastidious about calling it "asylum." Even if technically it was an emigration, they maintained that Touma's motives in emigrating were the same as one seeking asylum. It was a position that invited global attention.

IFLA's response contained proposals of cooperation in the asylum scheme from many of its member nations, beginning with the Netherlands, where IFLA was headquartered. However, they were

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<sup>8</sup> Literally means "missing one arm." It means to concentrate on one thing to the exclusion of others, to the point that your judgement becomes biased.

forced to exclude countries whose embassies were not large enough or powerful enough to take on such a burden; and in fact, some countries did send their regrets that they couldn't help because their embassies were too small.

The remaining countries were discussed, taking Touma's preferences into account, and the list was whittled down to the Netherlands, Sweden, the United Kingdom, the United States, and others.

"I think the Netherlands is our top candidate?" Genda asked, folding his arms.

"Yes, though the Dutch embassy is a little snug for my taste," Ogata answered. "The British embassy is the closest to the Supreme Court, but Touma's preferences put the Netherlands in first place." The other day, Ogata and Doujou's squad had gone on a reconnaissance mission to the heart of Tokyo where the embassies were concentrated.

If the Supreme Court handed down a verdict that restricted Touma's freedom of speech, Ogata and Doujou's squad would swiftly and secretly rush Touma to the embassy.

It was certain that on the day of the decision, the courthouse would be swarming with reporters, Improvement Special Agents trying to keep an eye on Touma, and supporters who had come to hear the decision. A large detachment of Library Task Force members would attend in full uniform, ostensibly to guard Touma--but this force would be a decoy. A small team consisting of Doujou's squad and Ogata would be the ones to lead Touma away.

The selection of Doujou's squad took advantage of the assumption that many would make in the confusion of the courthouse--that a group that included a woman was unlikely to be Touma's true bodyguard force. On that day, they would all be dressed in suits, disguised as officials. Iku had orders to wear a pantsuit and shoes she could run in, just in case.

On top of that, the civil suit challenging the Media Improvement Act's constitutionality brought by Touma's supporters had also been launched.

"We've committed all our forces. It's in the hands of fate, now," Ogata said to Genda, in the unusually empty Task Force office.

Genda spat sullenly, looking for all the world like a sulking child. "Not *all* our forces."

"Huh?"

"My rehabilitation wasn't done in time," he said indignantly.

Ogata burst out laughing. "You wanted to go out in the field, even now?"

Just half a year ago, he had been shot full of bullets. The very fact that he had continued to command the Task Force during his rehabilitation was unusual.

"Please don't get carried away, you'll make Orikuchi-san anxious again."

"That's going too far. I don't need to be told that by *you*."

Genda's sullen tone obviously concealed a guilty conscience, which just amused Ogata more.

As the Supreme Court trial slowly moved forward, the rainy season commenced.

Tedzuka Satoshi was appearing on the roaming report that evening, so some Force members remained in the office with Genda and took over the television. Doujou's squad was among them, and Shibasaki also made an appearance.

Tedzuka tried to go home, insisting that he had work to do, but Iku and Shibasaki stopped him. "Come on, don't be like that!"

His brother's efforts in this battle had begun to thaw Tedzuka's heart, but Tedzuka had clung to his animosity so stubbornly up until now that he was having trouble being honest with himself. For the two women, it was amusing to watch.

In point of fact, he did not resist Shibasaki and Iku enough to actually go home. Time was that he would have left even if he had to flatten Iku to get to the door--and perhaps the delicate Shibasaki as well.

Ever since Touma's trial had started, it had been treated as headline news alongside news about the terrorist attack, but since the details of the attack had been thoroughly covered and there had been no new activity, little by little Touma's trial was starting to get the lion's share of the coverage.

*"And now for some comments on this situation, we have Tedzuka Satoshi...wait? What!?"*

The anchorwoman, as if she had forgotten she was on camera, put a hand to her ear; she must have been wearing an earpiece.

Remembering that the cameras were rolling, she cleared her throat. A memo appeared in her hand, and she tried to look at the camera as much as she could even as her eyes passed over it.



She read, *"As Tedzuka Satoshi was attempting to enter the studio, a thug with a deadly weapon...a knife...attacked him in front of the station."*

"What the--!?"

Tedzuka stood up suddenly, his chair clattering to the floor.

"Tedzuka, *sit down and watch,*" said Genda, who was the farthest away from the television. His tone was so curt that it bordered on a rebuff. "That screen is the fastest way you're going to get information. Shut up and keep watching."

Iku had timidly stood Tedzuka's chair back up, and Shibasaki pulled on his sleeve until he sat back down in it.

*"His appearance on our show today has been...I don't believe it!"*

It was not the anchorwoman's fault that she wasn't able to read smoothly to the end of the memo.

*"I'm sorry I'm late."*

She had been interrupted by Tedzuka Satoshi himself, calling out a greeting as he strolled jauntily into the studio.

*"T-Tedzuka-san!? I thought you were being taken to the hospital!"*

*"Sounds like the story got garbled along the way. I was indeed attacked by a thug, but thanks to my excellent Library Force bodyguards, I escaped without a scratch. One of my bodyguards received a minor injury while apprehending the attacker, and was taken to the hospital."*

"...Thank God," Tedzuka sighed softly, as if he didn't want anyone to overhear. The rest of Doujou's squad and Shibasaki pretended not to have heard him.

*Beep-beep-beep!* came the sound of an impersonal ringtone. Tedzuka pulled out his cell phone and pressed it to his ear.

"Yes? ...Hello Father. Yeah. I saw. I--think he's all right."

*Hm?* Iku cocked her head, studying Tedzuka's phone. She could have sworn it was the kind Shibasaki had.

Tedzuka hung up after a short conversation and put the phone back in his pocket. Iku's attention was caught by the television again as the anchorwoman began to speak.

*"This just in: the attacker was a thirty year-old man, and a member of a group that supports the Improvement Act."*

*"I think this incident just goes to show just what kind of law the Media Improvement Act is," Tedzuka Satoshi interjected smoothly, with perfect timing. He was like an actor, and every studio he entered quickly became his stage. "The groups that support Touma-sensei, and oppose the Improvement Act, have never attacked an Improvement Act supporter like this. They do honest, hard work to bring people around to their point of view, through collecting signatures, making speeches, and passing out leaflets. But what about the Improvement Act supporters? They try to intimidate an inconvenient opponent with tactics like today's. It was the same at the Ibaraki Prefectural Art Exhibition. And as you all know, the Media Improvement Committee has groups of supporters like these all over the country."*

"You're one to talk! It's like the pot calling the kettle black!"

Tedzuka's acid commentary was back. Perhaps it was a sign that he was feeling better.

"He's just trying to get the maximum effect out of this incident," Genda pointed out. He turned to Ogata. "Who was on bodyguard duty today? Ask the Defense Force, and then send a get-well card." Ogata reached for the nearest phone.

"But...I thought the Improvement Act supporters couldn't lay a hand on Tedzuka Satoshi," Doujou said, alluding to the "nuclear bomb" that Tedzuka Satoshi possessed.

"In all likelihood, this is probably the rash action of a second-rate group who doesn't know the whole story. The perpetrator--or the whole group--just might find themselves erased. Their family registries could be tampered with; no trace of them would remain."

"Commander, you sound way too blasé about it," Iku protested timidly. "You're scaring me."

"Because it's true," Genda said in the same bland tone.

After Tedzuka Satoshi's appearance was done, Tedzuka rose from his seat and left the office. Shibasaki followed.

Iku began to stand up, intending to follow them, but after a brief moment sat back down.

Perhaps it was because of the cell phone she had noticed earlier. For some reason, she just had a feeling that it would be better to let them be alone for now.

"Here."

It was his own cell phone, which he had handed over to her so many months before, but Tedzuka hesitated to take it back.

He had told his parents that they could call him at Shibasaki's number for the time being, but he hadn't told Satoshi. Shibasaki had facilitated their occasional grudging phone calls.

"He's probably left the studio by now. Wouldn't he be happy to get a call from your phone number actually initiated by you?"

Tedzuka was still dithering, so Shibasaki spun around until her back was toward him.

"Well, he'd probably *also* be happy if I described in detail what you did when the report about the attack on him came in, wouldn't he..." She began to snap open the cell phone.

"Don't even think about it!" he said, grabbing the phone away from her. Shibasaki surrendered it easily. He was vexed all over again when he realized she had played him.

When he had Satoshi's number pulled up on the display, his back hit the corridor's wall with a *thump*. He slid down the wall until he was sitting on the floor.

The hem of her skirt was fluttering by at eye level; before he knew what he was doing, he reached out and grabbed hold of it. She had probably intended to leave and give him privacy, but--

"Please stay with me," he said.

Shibasaki stopped. "Fine, but let go, please. This fabric wrinkles." She was a pragmatic woman at all times.

He connected the number and counted the rings. He lost count partway through and started over at one; Satoshi answered on the third ring.

*"Hello, this is Tedzuka Satoshi. Shibasaki-san?"*

The way he asked, as if it were nothing unusual, got on Tedzuka's nerves for some reason.

"...It's me."

*"Hikaru! I've never been so happy to be wrong. Were you worried about me?"*

*That you would blithely ask that before I say anything is one of the things I hate about you!* he thought--but that did not erase the painful way his heart had pounded the moment it had been reported on live television that Satoshi had almost been stabbed.

"It's not like I want you dead. Father was worried as well. You're really not injured?"

*"Yeah, I'm fine. The Defense Force makes excellent bodyguards."*

"It goes without saying."

*"I'm on my way to the hospital to visit the one who was injured, before I go home."*

"That goes without saying too."

*"I suppose it does."*

Tedzuka cast his eyes around as he searched for something to say. And then his eyes met Shibasaki's. The woman he had kissed three times, and yet nothing had changed between them. There was no indication that she had become his, or that he had become hers. She was cocking her head, as if she was waiting to see what he would do.

"...It's not like I want you dead, so stay safe. I couldn't handle it if you up and died and your nuclear bomb went off."

On the other end of the line, Satoshi laughed jovially. *"I'll thank you for those words of concern, because I know it's the best I'm going to get out of you right now. You stay safe too. And give my best to Shibasaki-san."*

*Screw that last part*, he thought, hanging up without saying a word. He handed the phone back to Shibasaki, who started chuckling.

"...My, wasn't that a heartwarming brotherly exchange? Especially the little brother..."

"Shut up, leave me alone."

"A fine thing to say, after you ask me to stay with you!"

"Shibasaki."

Shibasaki turned around, and Tedzuka counterattacked with the retort that had just occurred to him. "Sometimes, you sound like an old woman."

"How...How dare you! That's the worst thing you could say to me! Grabbing a woman like me and calling me an--an..." She was too proud to even say the words.

As Shibasaki stamped her feet in frustration, Tedzuka tossed a "Thanks" over his shoulder and set out for the locker room. He was done with everything he had to do at the office. He didn't really feel like going back.

"Huh? Where's Tedzuka?" Iku asked Shibasaki, who had returned alone.

Shibasaki ground her teeth, and answered, "If you are referring to that *ingrate*, he had a touching conversation with his brother and then took off. The end!"

"What the hell? What's with the attitude? Did you guys get in a fight?"

"Of course not! I'm not close enough friends with Tedzuka to get in a fight with him!"

*Uh, from your mood, it looks like you got in one hell of a fight,* Iku thought, but she was much too scared to mention it to Shibasaki.

\*

The situation with Touma and the Improvement Act didn't mean they could shirk their other duties.

As they went about their daily lives, the season changed, and summer rolled around.

It was a strange summer--a typhoon either hit or nearly hit the Kantou region every weekend.

And then, on the day the biggest typhoon of the season hit Kantou, the Supreme Court reached a verdict on Touma's case.

## Chapter 4, Brave the Storm

\*

Rain had been coming down in sheets since morning, and low clouds hung like a thick curtain, which did not augur any improvement in the the weather.

By some coincidence, the roaming report had come back around to Delta TV, where it had first been broadcast.

There was a crowd of reporters gathered in front of the Supreme Courthouse, brimming with eagerness to gather information for their respective organizations.

*"We should be hearing the Supreme Court's verdict any moment now! The verdict was read just now, at 10 AM!"*

The reporter stood on one side of the screen and yelled into his microphone in the middle of a downpour so heavy that the ribs of his umbrella looked like they were about to buckle, though there wasn't even any wind yet. He had to shout to be heard over the rain.

Genda was watching the broadcast in the Task Force office, alone. The entire Task Force had been deployed, rounded out by a detachment from the Defense Force. Orikuchi, naturally, was reporting on-scene.

Genda glared at the television screen. He was finally realizing how stressful it could be to not be on the front lines.

*Well now. What verdict have they reached?*

*"The Supreme Court's verdict has been released! They have taken the appellate court's 'temporary restrictions on writing until the full story of the Tsuruga reactor terrorist attack is known' and limited them to one year!"*

The duration of the restriction period had been drastically reduced. But the problem wasn't its length. A reduction in duration wouldn't mean anything to the Improvement Committee. For all practical purposes, Touma's side had lost.

*"Additionally, the court's supporting opinion has been released. 'It is impossible to deny that there is room for doubt over the wording*

*of the Media Improvement Act enforcement order given by the special anti-terrorism law, which might allow for restrictions on the writings of authors and other creators, when we view it in light of our country's constitutional provisions. But a great number of citizens believe that the terrorist attacks have done serious and irreparable harm, and thus believe that we must excuse the totally unprecedented step of restricting an author's writings as unavoidable. However, in this case, it is feared that these measures might negate the provisions set forth in Section 4 of the Library Laws under Enforcement Order 8, "Libraries will render aid to authors or creators who ask for it." Additionally, this case points to the necessity that will arise one day of creating an opportunity to question whether the Media Improvement Act, or Section 4 of the Library Laws, are themselves constitutional.'..."*

Genda's hands balled into fists in his lap.

The supporting opinion was the strongest criticism of the Media Improvement Act that was possible at this point in history, and this could be counted as a substantial victory. It set the stage for a re-examination of the Media Improvement Act sometime in the future.

Still, it wasn't a compromise they could accept on the current case.

*"And that's the Supreme Court's verdict on this case, ladies and gentlemen!"*

"Alright, it's go time!" Genda muttered fiercely. His team should already be springing into action.

\*

When Touma and his legal team came out of the courtroom, the Library Task Force, who had been watching for them, surrounded them protectively. Outside that protective circle, a swarm of reporters surrounded the Task Force.

The knot of humanity moved through the courthouse and out the front entrance. The moment they crossed from the lobby out into the porte-cochère, the violent sound of the rain drowned out the reporters' questions.

"There will be a press conference later at the Kantou Library Base! Please hold your questions until then!"

"I'm sorry, but could members of the legal team make their own way to the Base, please!"

The voices of the Library Task Force members could cut through the sound of the rain and the clamor of the reporters. A Force member was trained to project his voice from the pit of his stomach.

At these announcements, the legal team burst through the throng surrounding them.

The Library Force's armored buses were parked in the porte-cochère, and a Force member yelled, "Touma-sensei, this way!" A rear door opened, and reporters stampeded in that direction. They at least wanted post-trial pictures. None of the reporters were paying attention to the quickly retreating legal team.

Among the disregarded clump of lawyers, one person was watching the scene and whispering.

"Touma-sensei, you should stand up straight. A hunching lawyer will stand out."

Touma straightened his spine. He was casually surrounded by four people.

Doujou's was the only squad in the Task Force that consisted of only four people. All four of them wore suits in subdued colors, to blend in with the sober, suit-clad legal team. Of course, this included Iku. For this reason, there were several female lawyers among the legal team.

"Good luck," said the head of the legal team behind them, as Touma and Doujou's squad broke into a casual-looking group and headed for the parking lot. They each opened umbrellas as they reached the edge of the porte-cochère, and continued walking into the downpour without missing a beat. Here and there, other lawyers were also heading to the parking lot. The legal team had all carpooled to the courthouse.

The Library Force's bus pulled away, and the press corps turned its eye toward the legal team.

"Can you give us just one word on the verdict!?" Orikuchi called unerringly to the head of the legal team. Other reporters followed her lead, surrounding the man.

"I'm sorry, but there's nothing I can tell you until the press conference..."

"Please, anything!"

"I'm sorry..."



Reporters surrounded the head lawyer and peppered him with questions. None of the reporters tried to follow the lawyers who had already left the scene. As in, the ones who were already out in the rain.

As soon as they had entered the parking lot and were safely away from the eyes of reporters, Doujou ran up to Touma and they all started walking quickly.

"Hurry!" he ordered them all tersely. They all quickened their steps, not wanting to slow Touma down. The Improvement Special Agency would have heard the verdict by now, and was probably already moving to secure Touma and put him under surveillance.

At last, Doujou left Touma to Komaki and ran over to a large, dark blue van. He slid the door open to reveal Ogata waiting in the driver's seat. The van looked ordinary, but it belonged to the Library Force and the windows were made of bulletproof glass.

There were three rows of seats, and seating had been decided beforehand. Doujou was in the passenger's seat. In the second row sat Tedzuka, then Touma in the middle, then Iku by the door. Komaki was in the back, where it was hardest to get in or out.

After Komaki had gotten in the back, Iku put her seat back up and climbed in, facing out the door. She hunkered down and closed her umbrella quickly before sliding the door closed; even that short time in the rain was enough to soak her hair and shoulders.

"Here," Komaki said, immediately passing her a towel from the back seat. She took it gratefully and rubbed at her hair, feeling damp like she had just come out of the bath.

"What a downpour!" she said.

"I've heard we might be in the middle of a record rainfall," Ogata replied in his usual cheerful tone, as he began to turn the steering wheel. Though the wipers whipped back and forth on their highest setting, water still poured down the windshield like a waterfall. "But thanks to the rain, it'll be impossible for anyone to see inside the van. Heaven is on our side today. ...To get to the Dutch embassy from here, I go down Uchibori-doori Street?"

"Yes sir, and then get on Sakurada-doori Street via the Sakurada Gate."

Iku was from the countryside and had no experience driving in Tokyo, so she wasn't familiar at all with the geography being discussed in the front seat.



She mostly remembered wandering around near the Tokyo Tower during her reconnaissance mission, so she leaned over Doujou's headrest and asked, "We're heading toward the Tokyo Tower, right?"

"Yeah, that's right. ...Not that I really care, but don't lean over a superior officer's head. If you're going to do it, come in from the side."

Doujou looked up at Iku with distaste. It was obvious that he *did* care.

Iku stuck out her tongue. "I'm sorry, sir," she said, drawing back.

"You know, sir, I can't see the Tokyo Tower in front of us..."

"You think you could, in this weather!?"

Tedzuka and even Ogata were poking fun at Doujou.

"It's raining so hard, I can't read the license plate of the car in front of us, and thanks to that, I've never had such a tough time knowing when to brake."

Perhaps because of that, traffic was moving sluggishly. Even so, the roads weren't particularly congested--probably because few cars had ventured into downtown Tokyo in this weather in the first place.

They finally saw the Tokyo Tower as they turned left at the Iikura intersection. They went down a street lined with trees in full leaf, and turned left again at the first traffic light, onto a street so narrow it made one wonder if it were meant for traffic at all.

They continued straight down the road, and as Iku remembered it, at the end of the street they would turn the corner in front of a temple. It was next to a raised green area that looked like it could be a park.

But when they turned the corner--

"What are they doing here!?" Iku screamed.

In contrast, the men were uniformly silent.

The street in front of the embassy was blocked with those orange-striped barricades used in construction zones.

A foreign staffer--a Dutchman, naturally--and a man in the familiar Improvement Special Agency uniform were arguing fiercely in front of the embassy. It was unclear whether either understood the other's language.

The staffer noticed their car first. He raised his arm and wildly waved them through. The Improvement agent noticed them at the same time Ogata's foot slammed on the accelerator.

There was a tremendous impact, but from the metallic sound, they had hit the barricade. Whether because the Improvement agent

had jumped out of the way, or he hadn't had time to try and block them, they didn't feel the kind of impact that would mean they had hit a person.

"Pray!" Ogata shouted.

"For what!?" Iku screamed back.

"That no one suddenly runs across the street!!"

In such a downpour, he wouldn't notice a sudden pedestrian until it was too late. But there were few pedestrians out in this weather in the first place, and by the time they got back to Sakurada-doori Street they had only seen a few, their umbrellas barely protecting them from the rain as they inched down the street.

After they had turned back onto Sakurada-doori Street and slipped into the flow of traffic, Iku cried, "Why!? Why was the Improvement Special Agency there!? That was Touma-sensei's first choice, too!"

She was holding up Touma, who had gotten dizzy from the sudden motion of the car.

No one answered her. Doujou pulled out his cell phone.

"--Commander? This is Doujou. The Improvement Special Agency was set up in front of the Dutch embassy."

After a short exchange, Doujou said, "Understood," and hung up.

"They're investigating the source of the leak as we speak. He said that Assistant Commander Ogata is in charge here."

"Understood," Ogata said. He was silent for a time, driving. But it wasn't very long.

"Sensei, I know it's your second choice, but let's stay away from the Swedish embassy. I'm heading for your last choice, the American embassy. When we got to the Dutch embassy, they hadn't totally finished sealing it off. It helped that the staff at the embassy were resisting, but if the Improvement Special Agency had had any advance warning, they wouldn't have come up with a tactic that could be defeated just by plowing right through it. The Improvement Special Agency probably only got the information a short time ago. By tomorrow, the enemy will be watching all the embassies. It might be risky, but somehow I'd like to get you to some embassy--any embassy--before the end of the day."

"I understand," Touma said decisively. "Do what you think best." He appeared to be over his dizzy spell, and was sitting up straight and facing squarely forward.

They went back up Sakurada-doori Street the way they had come. Ogata turned left halfway up the street, cautiously taking a roundabout way.

In stark contrast to the pastoral, cosy little Dutch embassy, the American embassy was housed in a huge building with a gleaming metal facade. The Stars and Stripes hung sodden from a flagpole before it.

The windows were mirrored glass, probably to make it impossible to see inside. There were Japanese police officers stationed at every entrance, and even a small police box for their use. It had the tightest security of all the embassies they had scouted--simply approaching the entrance during their walk around the perimeter had been enough to bring the police over to question them.

Ogata made a circle around the embassy and approached it from the side nearest Tameike-Sannou Station.<sup>9</sup> The embassy loomed like a fortress built on high ground; Ogata was driving toward its gate, near the fork in the road. They would be stopped and questioned at the gate, but since they had already gotten the embassy's support for Touma's asylum request, they should be waved through.

Ogata drove on, adjusting their position so they would be first in line at the traffic light before the embassy. Finally they arrived; the next turn would take them into the embassy.

From the other direction, a van came barreling through the intersection, disregarding both the stoplight and the direction of the street. It came to a sudden stop in front of the embassy, rolling on its side in a realistic imitation of a car accident. A second vehicle followed on the heels of the first, and pulled up close to their car.

"Shit!"

Ogata slammed on the gas pedal and pulled up to where the first van was overturned, but the Improvement agents pouring out of the second van were one step ahead of them. Their rapid deployment could be easily explained as hurrying to help the agents who were in the first van that had crashed on the embassy's grounds.

"Hurry!"

The exhortation did not come from any of them, but from the officer standing by in the police box. But they just couldn't make it, not with the elderly Touma in tow. Nor did they have room to turn the car around again.

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<sup>9</sup> From the northwest.

"Leave the car here! We'll go down the hill and split up--half of us will go toward Toranomom Station, the other half toward Tameike-Sannou Station!<sup>10</sup> Tedzuka, Komaki, you're coming to Toranomom with me!"

This perforce meant that Iku and Touma would go with Doujou.

"Wait, no! I'm going to drag them down! Please, have Tedzuka go with Instructor Doujou!"

"Stop whining and follow your orders!" Doujou roared, and Iku jumped out of the car and pulled Touma along with her. "They're going to mistake Touma-sensei for you! With this rain and your height, you look more like a man than he does!"

As he spoke, Doujou grabbed a professional-looking shoulder bag and put it on crosswise over his chest. Ogata was carrying the same kind of bag. As soon as Komaki got out of the car, he pulled his suit jacket up over his head and hunched over. Ogata shouted at them, loud enough to be heard over the rain--no, loud enough for the Improvement agents to hear him.

"Library Officer! Take the squadswoman back to the base! She's going to drag us down!"

And then Ogata's team took off running. Tedzuka had quickly grasped the plan, and along with Ogata, pretended to hold up the stooping Komaki as they ran. Given the torrential rain, it would be totally impossible to tell which team Touma was with.

"Run faster, Chief Librarian!"

In the same fashion as Ogata's team, Doujou and Iku held up the real Touma as they ran.

"I'm sorry! Wait for meeeee!"

She made sure to cry big crocodile tears--a woman's specialty--loudly enough for the Improvement agents to hear.

"Don't waste energy on bawling that you could be using to move your ass!"

Since some of them would have to make excuses to the embassy for the crash, not all of the Improvement agents could be spared to chase after Touma, and most of them that could appeared to be going after Ogata's team.

In the shadow of a building at the bottom of the hill, Touma distanced himself from them and Doujou and Iku lay in wait. When

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<sup>10</sup> Tameike-Sannou Station is a few blocks northwest of the American embassy; Toranomom Station is a few blocks northeast.

their pursuers caught up with them, they demonstrated just how effective their daily training regimen was, holding nothing back. Their opponents were three in number; they had probably figured that since there was a woman in the group, equal numbers would be plenty. It took less than a minute from when the Improvement agents had rounded the corner for Doujou and Iku to put all of them down on the ground.

Ogata's team did not ambush their pursuers at this point; their intention seemed to be to flee, acting as a decoy for as long as possible. Doujou and Iku could just barely hear the pounding of many feet through the rain that was so heavy that it was hard to see clearly across the street.

"We'll have to walk a little, but we can get on a train at Tameike-Sannou Station," Doujou said. "Is that alright?"

Touma replied, "I'm not much of a sprinter, but I can walk as far as I need to."

Though it was much too late to make a difference, they bought umbrellas at a stand in front of Tameike-Sannou Station. They might have been soaking wet, but a threesome without umbrellas in this weather would stand out. There were plenty of people, however, who had umbrellas but were still soaked.

\*

"What should we do from here?" Iku asked as they stood in front of the ticket machines.

Doujou frowned. "That's a tough question. They've obviously already put up a net around Tokyo. How will we get back to Musashi-Sakai?"

Musashi-Sakai was the closest station to the Library Base, and there would obviously be a net around it as well, so they would need the Force's help to enter the Library Base. Doujou was probably wondering how they could evade the net and reach the protection of the Library Force.

At that moment, Touma was gazing up at the route map, looking torn.

"If we got off at Hanzoumon, the British embassy would be right there<sup>11</sup>..."

The original plan would have allowed the Library Force drop the asylum bomb at the press conference, and Touma apparently still had some lingering attachment to that idea. After today, the embassies would be closely watched and they wouldn't get another chance; that also made it hard to give up now.

They couldn't keep the truth from the media forever. The asylum tactic had been envisioned as a swift poke to the hornets' nest of international opinion, and if they couldn't pull it off, it wouldn't be half as effective. Knowing that would only make it more disappointing if they failed.

While his bodyguards had made change after change to the plan, Touma hadn't mentioned any desires of his own until this moment. He hadn't simply accepted their leadership, he had put himself into their hands; perhaps it was his nature, but it meant that the first preference he had voiced had corresponding weight.

Even now, in such desperate straits, Touma wasn't insistent. Doujou looked down at the floor. No doubt it was difficult for him to ignore the request, as a longtime fan of Touma's.

Almost unconsciously, Iku reached out and squeezed Doujou's hand. His head snapped up.

"Why don't we just go and see?" Iku said. "A short peek will be enough to see what's going on. If it doesn't look good, we can run again. ...Is there anything wrong with that?"

Doujou squeezed Iku's hand hard for just a moment, and then let go.

"All right. Let's go for it. It would be a crying shame to just turn tail and go home without a plan when we've got an elite team acting as a decoy for us, after all."

They changed trains at Nagatachou Station, and the three of them got off at Hanzoumon Station.

When they came up aboveground, it was raining even harder, and had grown windy. The umbrellas they had purchased were compact folding vinyl ones, and in a moment they were flapping in the wind and turning inside out, their ribs likely to snap at any second.

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<sup>11</sup> Hanzoumon Station is a couple stops north of Tameike-Sanno, and the British Embassy is just a couple of blocks away from it.



The alley-like street never had many pedestrians, and there were even fewer out today due to the typhoon.

They left the station and walked along the narrow street in the direction of the Imperial Palace, and soon the embassy came into view. However, the first thing they saw was a tall white wall topped with a spiked iron fence to deter intruders. The British Embassy occupied a long, narrow rectangular lot that ran parallel to the Shuto Expressway; the shorter sides of the rectangle were nearly 100 meters long, and the longer sides were over 300 meters.

They stopped behind the embassy, in sight of its southwest corner, and Doujou sank into thought.

"Time to think about our approach..."

The wall was much too high to climb without equipment, but--

"I wish we had the equipment to sneak in... There are probably security cameras everywhere, so the embassy security team would come out in a heartbeat if we looked like trespassers..."

"Instructor Doujou, you're starting to sound like Commander Genda, talking like that!"

Doujou's expression grew cross, and turned to face Iku. "It was the most logical conclusion. Only embassy security can see the security footage, so only embassy security would come after us. Though what happened next would depend on how fast they thought on their feet, so I'd be a little nervous about that part."

The way he hated not having control of a situation from beginning to end also reminded her of Genda. She knew if she said that, he would only get crosser, so she kept it to herself.

Instead, she made a suggestion.

"I'll go walk around the perimeter and check out the entrance, and see if there are any Improvement agents there. I don't think they'll be suspicious of a woman by herself. Instructor Doujou, please take Touma-sensei around the back of the embassy and wait at the far corner."

Doujou frowned at her proposal. "Well, I don't know..."

"Isn't Touma's safety the highest priority? If something happened, I wouldn't be able to make the appropriate decisions, so scouting duty should fall to me. There's only two of us, so we gotta split the roles up logically. Just going and taking a look is something even I can do. We'll just meet up on the opposite corner. And then depending on what I saw, we'll think about what to do next."

She pressed him hard, until Doujou agreed, still frowning. "Listen carefully. Don't do *anything* that might arouse suspicion. Don't stop in front of the entrance. Walk slowly from the very start, and just see whatever you can observe at that pace."

Then Doujou, with Touma following, started walking up the street behind the embassy. Iku set off along the short street along the side of the embassy that would take her around to the front.

She walked quickly along this street, then turned the corner onto the street in front of the embassy. In front of the embassy was a tree-lined dirt path. On most days there would be people jogging on it or walking their dogs, but today it had turned into one big mud puddle. The path passed directly in front of the entrance to the embassy, but walking on it today would be suspicious in the extreme.

Instead, Iku took the stone path that passed in front of the line of trees. This path was so covered in muddy water that it made almost no difference to her footwear, but it was more natural to choose a stone path over a muddy dirt path. At least, most women wouldn't be caught dead setting foot in that giant mud puddle.

She slowed her pace and weaved along the path, pulled along by her wind-whipped umbrella (this part wasn't actually an act). Since she was far from ladylike in her daily life, she was a little uncertain how a "typical girl" would act in this situation.

The embassy's entrance was toward the north end of this block. The walk there was long.

She passed several people who looked like businessmen. They walked with big loping strides, hunched over, hugging their briefcases to their chests. The rain and wind was coming from every direction, so it didn't matter how carefully one aimed one's umbrella.

Constantly scanning her surroundings, she finally neared the entrance, and then felt a wave of unease. The businessmen she had passed had all been carrying bags of some kind.

*Maybe it's weird to be empty-handed while wearing a suit. I should have borrowed Doujou's shoulder bag.*

But if she turned back now, it would look even more suspicious. Iku gathered her resolve and passed in front of the entrance. As she expected, security guards in raincoats stood both in front of and past the gate.

Then the brick road leading into the embassy suddenly opened up before her. A single van, with a characteristic intimidating air that

was out of place on the old-fashioned pavement, was parked aggressively across the brick sidewalk.

And indeed, there were Improvement agents in black raincoats wandering around the entrance. Iku didn't avert her eyes, but stared as if in curiosity. Her feet, of course, never stopped moving. The Improvement agents must have been accustomed to being stared at, for they ended up paying Iku no heed at all.

*Mission accomplished. Now I just have to meet up with Doujou.* She stifled the urge to quicken her pace and kept her steps slow.

Just as she passed the entrance, the direction of the wind changed suddenly.

"Whoa!"

Just like that, several of the ribs of her umbrella were broken.

Her heart was racing. Letting out a high-pitched shriek for effect, Iku forcibly furled her umbrella. She was aware that the Improvement agents had glanced her way for a moment, but they soon ignored her again.

"Oh, this is the worst!"

Iku put the broken umbrella under one arm, put her other arm up in front of her face and started running. There was no sign of pursuit. It was a common enough accident during a storm.

Doujou and Touma were waiting at the promised corner.

"What the hell happened to your umbrella?"

"It snapped in the wind... More importantly, the Improvement Special Agency was there. This embassy is no good."

Hearing her report, Doujou turned back to Touma. "Touma-sensei, if I recall correctly, the Irish and Portuguese embassies are on the other side of the subway station. They're both smaller than the British embassy, so the enemy might not have gotten around to them yet. Do you want to try and go there?"

"Sounds good to me. After all, we've already come this far."

As they set out along the short northern edge of the embassy--

"Hey, you over there!"

They could tell from the high-handed tone. It was an Improvement agent.

The voice came from the street Iku had walked down. Perhaps they had found her accident suspicious after all.

They made brief eye contact, and Iku turned around.

"What is it?"

"Your umbrella just broke back there, right? If you'd like mine..."

The Improvement agent was holding a vinyl umbrella that was no use to him, raincoat-clad as he was. But he was also staring suspiciously at Doujou and Touma behind her. Touma in particular.

"You...!"

His hand went to his breast pocket, and pulled out a radio.

*I'm sorry. I'm sorry for what I'm about to do to you even though you were concerned about me after my umbrella snapped.* Silently apologizing, Iku threw her broken umbrella as hard as she could at the man.

*Nevertheless, you and I are enemies!*

The man recoiled, and in that split second, Doujou grabbed Touma's hand and ran. To hide from the Improvement agent, they flew through the intersection on the tiny street, toward Kudan<sup>12</sup>. The street where they had been talking led straight to the other two embassies.

In a few dozen meters they reached another intersection, and turned left again.

"Let's dodge them somehow and give them the slip inside Hanzoumon Station! If we leave by a different exit, we'll also be closer to the embassies!"

Purely by feel, Doujou chose a complicated back-alley route. In order to shake off the pursuit that was already coming, Doujou turned at every little street, sometimes going in the opposite direction from their destination as a feint. Touma was breathing hard, and Doujou and Iku were supporting him as they ran.

But when they got to Hanzoumon, there were signs that Improvement agents were already in place to nab them. No matter which way they turned, the way was blocked by a figure clad in a black raincoat.

Eventually they were forced toward Kudan, in the opposite direction from Hanzoumon.

"A car! Can you get a car to stop!?"

"I can try, sir!"

Iku leaned out into the street and waved wildly at the taxis rushing by. But when they got closer, they all turned out to be occupied or out of service. She was starting to think about just running out in front of one of the out-of-service taxis and forcing it to stop, when--

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<sup>12</sup> A region of Tokyo northwest of their current position.

A loud *pop* exploded through the sound of the pounding rain. It was a sound she knew.

Iku whipped around to look at Doujou at the same instant that he twisted around and fell to the ground.

Through the curtain of rainfall, she could see a black raincoat.

"Instructor Doujou!"

Iku ran over and put her arms under Doujou, who was trying to get up. A river of blood was pouring out of his right thigh.

They had shot him? On this narrow sidewalk, which wasn't totally empty of people despite the typhoon driving most of them indoors? With such a strong wind, which could have blown the bullet off course until it hit god knows who?

"Ughhh..." Doujou groaned. He dipped his hand into his shoulder bag, and pulled out a SIG Sauer P220.

Doujou took aim at the black raincoat a few dozen meters away in the rain--but in the end, he angled the gun up far enough not to hit anyone and squeezed the trigger.

It must have worked as a threat, for the black-raincoat-clad figure hid behind a corner.

"Ichigaya Station is close by, take Touma-sensei there...I'll hold them back here."

*No!* she wanted to scream, but she didn't. Touma. Touma was their first priority. Even if her heart had a different first priority.

The fierce rain was washing away the blood that poured from Doujou's leg before it could stain the asphalt.

*Heaven is on our side today*, Ogata had said of the rain. It had now become their enemy. If Doujou stayed back to hold off the Improvement forces, battered by the rain with no medical treatment, he would soon be in serious danger from massive blood loss.

"We couldn't possibly leave you. How long do you really think you can hold them off, lying there in this rain?" Touma said gravely. "From the rate of the bleeding, I'd say one of your arteries was hit. If you stay here, you might well die of blood loss."

"Please, I'll be fine, so go! Kasahara, get the hell out of here!"

*No!* she screamed, bolstered by Touma's position. She untied Doujou's necktie and used it to stop the bleeding as best she could, though it was far from a perfect solution.

"Touma-sensei, please run! I'll take care of Instructor Doujou!"

At that moment, a voice called to them from the road. "Hey, are you folks the Library Force? And that author?"

When she turned to look, she saw a middle-aged man in a beat-up old truck.

"We are, but what do you want!?"

"Was it the Improvement Committee that shot that boy there?"

"Yes, sir!" Iku snapped. She might have been crying. The heavy rain mixed with tears, blood, and sweat, and washed it all away.

"Ichigaya Station is close by! Go slip onto a train! I'll buy you enough time to get into the station!"

"What? But--" *How does he plan to do that?* Iku cocked her head in doubt, and the man flashed her a grin.

"I signed that petition too! If you're fighting the Improvement Committee, I'm on your side!"

He waved for them to go, and though Iku still wondered how he planned to slow down the Improvement agents, she headed for the station. Doujou could just barely walk, dragging his right leg and leaning heavily on Iku's shoulder.

After a few moments--

A sound like a traffic accident came from behind them.

Startled, Iku looked back. The truck from before was now on the sidewalk. It had plowed into the row of shuttered shops.

"Hey! What the hell have you done to my shop!"

"Sorry about that, sorry about that, I lost control in the rain! Call the police, these people can tell them it was an accident!"

"Excuse me!? Do you know who we are...!?"

"Hey! If you saw what happened, I need you to stay and give a statement! I'm going to go call the police right now!"

"Are you alright? Some of you fell down, didn't you? You should check yourselves for injuries!"

"No thank you! We don't have time for that!"

"Oh no, you mustn't say that! I don't want you to leave without checking yourselves over and then hit me with a frivolous lawsuit later! I haven't been driving this truck for years for nothing!"

Proprietors of nearby shops pulled up their shutters and came out too, turning the scene into full-blown pandemonium. The flustered Improvement agents were surrounded by those involved in the crash, who were all deaf to the agents' attempts to extricate themselves. They had indeed been held back.

Grateful to the man who had sacrificed his truck to buy them time, Iku stealthily ran for the stairs that descended from the sidewalk down to Ichigaya Station.

"For now, let's take the TMBT line to Shinjuku," Touma said. He must have had an idea. Iku nodded.

"Excuse me, instructor!"

Iku crouched down at Doujou's feet, and hoisted him over her shoulder in one motion.

"Hey..." Doujou said, apparently too exhausted to yell at her.

Iku babbled, "Since we're inside, there's no rain to wash the blood away, after all. Hang on, I'm going to run to the ticket gate!"

She started running, holding his injured leg as close to her chest as she could so that her clothes would absorb the blood. Her training had prepared her to carry someone if she needed to, but running down the stairs at top speed was indeed taxing on her female body.

"I'll run on ahead and buy tickets!" Touma said. Though he ran earnestly, she was still fast enough to be hot on his heels.

Iku reached the ticket gate at the same time that Touma came back with the tickets.

"I'm sorry, it's an emergency!" she cried, and the gate was opened for her.

"This way!" Touma said, and she followed, stepping onto a down escalator and lowering Doujou. It was black, so the blood wouldn't show much.

When they reached the platform, she picked Doujou back up.

"You don't have to--"

"Not until we get on a train!"

A train had just slid into the station, so she mustered the last of her strength and dove onto it.

"I'm sorry, I've got an injured person here! Please clear a space, if you don't want to get blood on yourselves!"

The sight of Iku carrying Doujou, her shirt sticky with his blood, was a more effective appeal than her words. A space opened up instantly. She sat Doujou down on the floor there, with his back propped up against the wall. As she watched, a pool of blood spread beneath his thigh.

Iku had taken Doujou's bag and slung it across her own chest. It contained their weapons, but it also contained a first-aid kit. She couldn't very well open a bag full of weapons in the middle of a ring of passengers, so she thrust her hand inside and felt around.

SIG Sauer P220, submachine gun, spare magazines... At last, her hand found a vinyl pouch.

"Bingo!"

She pulled it out; it was indeed the first-aid kit. She took out a triangle bandage and used it to stop the bleeding--all she had been able to do before was sloppily tie his necktie over the wound.

After she was done administering first aid, she looked back up at Doujou. His face was bloodless and pale.

"Are you alright?"

"Yeah, thanks to my pushy subordinate and her superhuman strength..." The words were sardonic as always, but his voice didn't have its usual power.

Touma, who was standing some feet away with the other passengers, turned to the rest of the train and bowed his head.

"I'm sorry for the shock that we've given you all, but please know that we are not questionable characters. I am Touma Kurato, the author, and these two are my bodyguards from the Library Force. This man was wounded after being shot by the Improvement Special Agency."

The passengers had probably feared that the three of them were involved in some kind of mob war, but after Touma's pronouncement, the nervous atmosphere of the train car gave way to cautious sympathy. Nearly everyone in Japan had heard about the situation Touma was embroiled in.

"We'll be getting off at Shinjuku-Sanchoume Station.<sup>13</sup> Until then, I beg for your forbearance."

After Touma's explanation, several of the passengers offered towels and other things. Iku used some of them to mop up the pool of blood, and a fresh one to rub at Doujou's hair, face, and clothing.

"Can you get your jacket off?"

"Yeah..." Doujou nodded. Doujou's movements were slow, and Iku had to help him take off his jacket. She took advantage of the brief stop at the station to wring the jacket out; water trickled onto the platform and the tracks as if from a faucet. If he had kept it on, it would have stolen his body heat. On top of the blood loss, that might have been fatal.

She rubbed at his dress shirt, trying to dry it as much as she could, before putting his jacket back on him. It was a little wrinkled, but it was better than one thin dress shirt in the air-conditioned interior of the train car.

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<sup>13</sup> Two miles and two stops away, a five minute train ride.



She had dressed his wound, and dried his clothing as best as she could, but it was obvious even to her that he would become hypothermic if he stayed in his wet clothes. She wanted to make him change, but there was no way to do so. Iku would have given him her own clothing if it were dry, but she was soaked to the skin as well. All she could do was rub hard at his clothes with the towel.

As she was doing that, they passed through the intervening station, and before she knew it, the announcement came for Shinjuku-Sanchoume Station.

After the train had decelerated, Iku offered Doujou her shoulder. He leaned against it without a word of protest.

"Hold me up. We're going to run for it."

"Touma-sensei will set the pace," Iku said, looking steadily at Touma. "He's the one with the plan now, it seems like."

Touma nodded quietly.

They disembarked at Shinjuku-Sanchoume Station, and Touma led them from there. He navigated the complicated underground shopping area with practiced ease, and it was all Iku could do to keep up with him as she supported Doujou.

At last they arrived at their destination, which turned out to be a large bookstore that was part of a national chain. Touma said something to one of the employees, and soon the proprietor ran out to meet them.

"Sensei, it's been so long!"

Apparently the proprietor was friends with Touma.

"Please excuse our appearance, but we're being pursued by the Improvement Special Agency and we've got a wounded person with us. Could we borrow your back room to rest for a while?"

"Under those circumstances? Of course!"

The proprietor led Touma through the store, and Iku and Doujou followed.

"I'm sorry it's such a mess back here, but on the plus side, there's more than one exit."

The storage room they were taken to was piled high with books and heavy cardboard boxes.

"There's an office there in the back," the proprietor told Doujou.

After a beat, Doujou slowly raised his head. "No. I can't make a mess of your office. Perhaps I could borrow some spare cardboard, and someplace where I'll be out of the way."

"But..." the proprietor hesitated.

Iku added her voice. "Let's do that. The walls and floors here won't stain, after all... And I think the temperature out here is better for him right now."

Either the storage room didn't have air conditioning, or the room was too big for it to do much good, but at another time she might have called the room a little stifling. But at this time of year, the office would definitely have the air conditioner running, and that would be too hard on Doujou right now.

In the end, they got a stack of cardboard boxes and made a space for Doujou to sit down. The walls and the floors would have stolen Doujou's body heat otherwise.

Doujou sat down, leaned against the wall, and let his head droop.

"...What's the status of Assistant Commander Ogata's team?"

Iku pulled out her phone, but though it had been secure in her pocket, it was soaked. It was reasonably waterproof, but it would surely break if she tried to turn it on now.

"I'm sorry, I can't use my phone right now... Shall I go see if I can use the phone in the office?"

"Nah. Don't worry about it. They wouldn't make a blunder like me."

Touma, who had gotten down on his knees next to Iku, gazed at Doujou and then hung his head. "I'm so sorry. It's my fault; I shouldn't have been so gung-ho about getting to an embassy."

"No. It would have been too harsh to tell you to give up on the idea when the embassy was so close. I'm in a combat job. I'm prepared to face this kind of injury. In fact, I'm glad it was me who was shot. Instead of you, or a passerby, or...my subordinate..."

Tears sprang to Iku's eyes, and she bit her lip. If she hadn't, she would have started to cry, and she didn't want it to appear that Doujou had a weepy little girl as a subordinate.

"Touma-sensei, do you have a plan after this?" Doujou asked.

Touma answered hesitantly, "I'd like it if you'd let me continue by myself... When the typhoon subsides, I was thinking of heading to Osaka."

"Ah... That's right, there's still that option."

Iku, reluctant to make Doujou talk too much, looked at Touma. He noticed the question in her eyes and answered it. "The embassies are concentrated in Tokyo, but Osaka has a high concentration of consulate-generals.<sup>14</sup> And consulate-generals have the same privileges as embassies. Including the fact that their grounds are extraterritorial."

"But don't wait until the typhoon subsides," Doujou interjected. "Today, the enemy is angry, and making mistakes. But they'll calm down and think. And then they'll watch the Shinjuku Line, the airports, all the other means of long-distance travel. If you're going to go, go today."

"But the Shinjuku Line and the airports aren't running today."

At that, Doujou turned to Iku. "Kasahara, you have a driver's license, right?"

"Y-Yes, sir!"

"Drive Touma to Osaka. Go to a rent-a-car place, get a car with the newest car navigation system, one even you can operate. For money, use this." Doujou pulled his wallet out of his pocket and handed it Iku.

Touma held out a hand. "I'll pay for it. I *should* pay for it. I have a credit card and an ATM card."

But Doujou didn't back down. "There's a risk that your assets might be illegally frozen. Bodyguard's expenses are included in the budget. You can pay the Library Force back after you get asylum."

Doujou folded Iku's hand over his wallet and told her his ATM card's PIN number.

"When you go to withdraw cash, withdraw the daily maximum. Rent the car in your name and pay in cash. You can't use my credit card, so pay for everything with cash from my account."

Iku nodded, just as a female shopworker, with conscientious timing, addressed them.

"Um...maybe you don't need them, but I got Touma-sensei and the two of you a change of clothes, so you can put them on if you'd like to. I cut the tags off already and everything."

If they'd like to? They would more than like to.

"Thank you!"

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<sup>14</sup> An embassy represents the home country to the host country's government; a consulate serves individuals and businesses (for instance, citizens of the home country who are traveling in the host country, or citizens of the host country who want to travel to the home country). A consulate-general is the office of a high-ranking consul.

The paper bag bore the name of clothing brand famous for its cheapness and variety. Inside were three people's worth of clothing. She found a shirt, jacket, and underwear that were probably meant for Touma and passed them over, then started looking for Doujou's share.

Understanding that Doujou wouldn't be able to change into complicated clothing, she had bought him a hooded sweatshirt, a long-sleeved, wide-necked t-shirt, and loose cotton pants. They were all black, perhaps so the blood wouldn't show.

Doujou allowed Iku to peel the clothing off the upper half of his body and help him change, but when she picked up the pants, he said, "I can do that myself!" and snatched them from her. "Go get changed yourself. You look like you're on your way home from a mob killing."

So she picked up the bag with the remaining clothes and followed the shopworker to a place where she could change.

The shopworker had been sensitive to their situation while buying her clothes, and had gotten safe colors--a white long-sleeved shirt and a black cardigan, along with a pair of jeans. The jeans had an elastic waistband--since the shopworker hadn't known Iku's size, she had gotten pants that would stretch to accommodate.

"Are they long enough? I got longish ones because you're quite tall, but..."

"They're perfect, thank you."

Her shoes were black leather, so they could hide anything.

When Iku finished changing and went back to where Doujou was, she found despite his protestations he hadn't changed his pants. Apparently he didn't have enough strength remaining to attempt it.

"Don't look at me like that. The manager's already called me an ambulance. And this wound isn't nearly as bad as the ones that laid the commander low."

"It's not funny!"

Tears fell helplessly from her eyes. Truly, if he had to be shot with a handgun, it would have been better if he had been shot in the chest. Touma and his bodyguards were all wearing bulletproof vests under their clothing, and the distance had been considerable.

Doujou smiled wryly. "Don't cry. Smile. You're in charge from here on out, so you gotta pull yourself together. You are wearing your bulletproof vest under that, yeah?"

She nodded through her tears.

"Oh, right," Doujou said, rummaging through his discarded clothing. Since he was headed straight to the hospital, he had taken

off his bulletproof vest. He dragged out the dress shirt that was trapped beneath it.

Pinned to his breast pocket, where it would be hidden by a jacket, was the rank insignia of a Library Officer Second Class.

With slow, deliberate movements, Doujou unfastened that badge.

"Come here."

Iku leaned in, and with deathly pale fingers, Doujou pinned it to her collar.

"You wanted your *camomille*, didn't you? I'll lend you mine. Just promise to bring it back."

And then he laid a hand on her head.

"It'll be okay. You can do it."

Her emotions went off the scale.

She grabbed the nape of Doujou's neck.

And then--

Without giving a damn about his wishes, Iku pressed her lips to his.

Long enough to impart some of her body heat to his icy lips.

When she thought they had warmed up a little, Iku pulled away, and declared in ringing tones, "Then you promise me, too! When I come back, I'm gonna give your *camomille* back, and I'm gonna tell you that I love you! So you better promise to get better! I will never forgive you if you don't get better!"

There was a momentary stir among the shopworkers, who then pretended to go back to what they were doing.

"Shall we go, Kasahara-san? Apparently the highway isn't closed even with this typhoon."

At Touma's prompting, Iku stood. She slung the shoulder bag back over her body.

She didn't look at Doujou again. If she caught one more glimpse of his suffering figure, she wouldn't be able to leave him.

Following the proprietor, Iku and Touma left the storage room.

Doujou knew from experience that the blurring of his vision meant that he was about to faint. It was through that haze that he watched Iku go, walking tall with her shoulders straight.

"...Think about how I feel being left behind at a time like this, idiot."

The shopworkers continued to pretend to be engrossed in their duties, but their curious interest in the wounded, out-of-commission

"boyfriend" was almost tangible. After the ambulance arrived and he was loaded into it, they would surely be discussing and embellishing the story.

There was no helping idiots.

That was the last thought Doujou had before he blacked out.

\*

The proprietor first led Iku and Touma to a nearby convenience store. The umbrellas they had lost had been replaced at the bookshop. Their clothes were the same economical brand, so they complemented each other. They had totally transformed from the poor little drowned mice who had entered the bookshop, and blended into the crowds of Shinjuku so well that Improvement agents could have walked right past them without recognizing them.

In accordance with Doujou's orders, Iku used his ATM card to withdraw the daily maximum from his account from the convenience store's ATM. The money didn't come in an envelope, so she grabbed it and thrust it into her bag. It was a bigger stack of bills than she had ever encountered in her own life, and she was a little apprehensive.

"I think this will be enough for now," Iku said, turning to Touma.

He nodded. "I'm also carrying some cash. It should be more than enough."

The next place the proprietor led them was the rental car agency. It was a local branch, so thankfully they were able to get a car quickly.

She reserved a sedate sedan for two days and one night, arranging to return it to a branch in Osaka. She left no leeway in the return date; it would push them to get to Osaka within the day.

When she finished the arrangements and returned to Touma, she found that the proprietor wasn't with him.

"Where did he go?"

"He said he'd be right back..."

Touma was sitting inconspicuously on a sofa in the waiting area of the rental agency, and Iku joined him. They took turns going to the bathroom, and by the time they had finished, the car was ready.

"Kasahara-san, your car is ready. Please go to the parking lot."

It bothered her that the proprietor hadn't returned yet, but they had no time to lose. Reluctantly, the two of them headed to the parking lot. The wind had abated, but the rain was fierce as ever.

They had climbed into their car, and Iku was listening to an explanation of the car navigation system, when--

"Oh thank god, I made it!"

The proprietor ran over to them, both hands full of bags, not even holding up his umbrella. He opened the back door and tossed the bags onto the back seat, then handed a shopping bag to Touma in the passenger seat.

"I got you some tea and proper food. The bags in the back are some things I just threw together; I hope they come in handy."

"Ah, thank you very much," Touma said, accepting the bag. They were in no position to turn down the proprietor's generosity.

"Be safe!" the proprietor said, slamming the back door, cutting off Iku's attempt to thank him. The mechanic who had been explaining the navigation system shut the door, and Iku used the voice input on the system to direct them to Osaka Station for the time being.

The navigation system responded immediately, and Iku followed its directions, turning on her blinker. The mechanic waved them out.

The proprietor had finally put up his umbrella now that his hands were no longer full; she could see him waving in the rearview mirror, but Iku wasn't a good enough driver to wave back and drive at the same time. Not to mention, it was her first time driving in Tokyo.

Instead, Touma rolled down his window and waved back.

As Iku drove, Touma reached into the back seat and pulled the bags onto his lap.

"He packed us a towel. And a blanket... Oh, these'll come in handy!"

"What are they?"

Driving through the downpour, Iku couldn't take her eyes off the road for a moment. She had set the wipers going as fast as they could, but the brake lights of the car in front of her were still blurred by the rain. She didn't know when she might have to brake, so all she could do was leave some room ahead of her and squint at the next car. It was also after three, and dark as evening thanks to the low-hanging clouds.

"A road atlas of the whole country and a detailed map of the Osaka metro area."

"Oh, how useful! That's exactly the kind of thing a bookseller would think of!" Iku said with forced enthusiasm. Otherwise, she wouldn't be able to stop thinking about leaving Doujou behind.

"Do you want to get in touch with the Library Base?"

"We'll call them the first time we stop for a break. I can't use my phone until it dries out anyway, and also, I think the hospital will contact the Library Base. Let's try and put as much distance between us and Tokyo as we can before sunset."

As she waited for the light to turn, she toyed unconsciously with the collar of her shirt. The Library Officer rank pin was heavy on her fingertips.

*Please, let him be all right.*

Beside her, Touma was not tactless enough to say, *"It'll be okay."*

\*

"...I've respected you as a superior officer ever since I enlisted," Shibasaki said expressionlessly to the man before her. Hiding her emotions was one of Shibasaki's special skills. She was so used to doing it that it wouldn't be an exaggeration to call it an ingrained habit.

Shibasaki and the man were the only people in the room. She was not worried that someone else would suddenly intrude, because this was the library director's office, and the man who inhabited it was Acting Director Hatano.

Hatano's elbows were currently propped up on his desk, his head bowed.

"It was you, wasn't it."

She didn't elaborate. Hatano slowly raised his head. His stony expression said it all for him--that he had been the one to leak the plans for Touma's asylum to the Media Improvement Committee.

"I'm sorry I couldn't live up to your respect."

"May I ask why you did it?"

The Hatano that Shibasaki knew was a fair man who honored the ideals of the principlist faction, and was popular both with his superiors and his subordinates. He was the one who had kept Toba from giving in to the Board of Education's demands. He was the one who had told off Toba for yielding to the Improvement Special Agency's unlawful order to hand over Komaki.

Hatano smiled faintly.

"I was torn, right up until the end. --But you see, I also had a superior officer I looked up to. It was the only choice I could make."

"Are you talking about former Director Etou?" Shibasaki asked baldly.



Hatano betrayed no reaction. "Director Etou's arrival was, frankly, a complicated time for me. We were the same age, but he surpassed me in both rank and post. And I didn't think I had been promoted slowly. I brooded over what was different about us. But when I saw Director Etou's unwavering commitment to neutrality, I understood what I was missing."

"*That wasn't something you were missing,*" Shibasaki was too young to tell him. All she could do was wish he had realized it for himself.

"You joined the Library of Tomorrow Project at former Director Etou's invitation."

"Yes. *Prior* to its change in direction." His tone repudiated Tedzuka Satoshi and the current direction of the Library of Tomorrow Project. "The Library of Tomorrow Project was supposed to stay neutral. Stay neutral and behind the scenes, and over a long period of time, whittle away the Improvement Committee's right to censor and their areas of authority."

"Former Director Etou was behind the plot to hand over Touma-sensei to the Improvement Committee while he was under the Library Force's protection. Can you call that 'neutrality'?"

"At this stage, we should have been lulling the Improvement Committee into a false sense of security while we strengthen our lines of communication. For the sake of a neutrality in line with our long-term goals, it was unavoidable. And when Director Etou slipped up, he intended to take full responsibility, and told his subordinates as much. And then Tedzuka Satoshi cut him loose."

"Don't you think that it was former Director Etou's actions that forced the Library of Tomorrow Project to change direction?"

She had no sympathy for the Library of Tomorrow Project before its change, but she asked the question anyway, just to see what he would say.

But Hatano just repeated, "Tedsuka Satoshi cut Director Etou loose. The man who had sacrificed himself for the ideals of the Library of Tomorrow Project before the change in direction."

"And that's why you remained part of the Library of Tomorrow Project, and turned traitor?"

Shibasaki said the word plainly, and Hatano flinched for the first time.

"I wanted to carry on Director Etou's wishes..."

"In that case, you should have left the Library of Tomorrow Project and formed a new group of your own. Did you know that not one person left the Library of Tomorrow Project after it changed direction? Tedzuka Satoshi was the one who managed the nigh-impossible task of creating such a loyal organization. For you to remain lurking within that magnificent achievement, sowing the seeds of betrayal, was dishonorable. And the same goes for former Director Etou, if that was what he wanted you to do. Is the man you admired really that kind of person?"

Hatano raised his voice. "For the sake of those ideals, and for the sake of Tedzuka Satoshi whom he admired, Director Etou got his hands dirty and did what he did on his own! Tedzuka Satoshi was the one who abandoned him! And yet he doesn't even have the grace to feel embarrassed about betraying him! He's on TV all the time like he's the Library Force's new spokesman!"

Shibasaki listened to all this calmly, without even a ripple of expression passing over her face. "It doesn't excuse what you did. You spat on the very ideals you hold dear. And on former Director Etou's wishes."

Shibasaki still didn't know Tedzuka Satoshi very well. She only knew him through his younger brother. But she could still state with authority that Tedzuka Satoshi was not the kind of man who would be grateful for others for getting their hands dirty on his behalf.

Shibasaki hadn't forgiven Tedzuka Satoshi for the tactics he had used before they were allies. Or for getting Iku held hostage by an inquest. Or for indirectly forcing Inamine's retirement.

But if Tedzuka Satoshi used underhanded tactics, at least he was upfront about it. If someone accused him of using underhanded tactics, he wouldn't even blush. And with his own hands and unblushing face, he had built an organization that didn't hesitate to use underhanded tactics.

Tedzuka Satoshi was underhanded, but he was honorable about his underhandedness. If he needed someone to get their hands dirty, he would do it himself. Even now that they had joined forces, he didn't try to gloss over the fact that he had used Iku, or his little brother's roommate Sunagawa. She couldn't help but admire a little his capacity to be honorably underhanded.

For ten years he had followed the same path, even while being rebuked by the brother whose sympathy he desired most. For the sake

of bringing his ideals to fruition, he had continued to engage in underhanded tactics.

He would never even make excuses to his brother for his behavior. And if he wouldn't make excuses to his own brother, he certainly wouldn't make excuses to anyone else. Shibasaki could tell that Tedzuka Satoshi had a strange honor code that way.

But what about Hatano? What about Etou?

Those men who preyed on others, freely used underhanded tactics, and called that honorable?

"Thank you," said Shibasaki, giving a deep and heartfelt bow. "For turning into a superior officer I couldn't respect, in the end. If I respected you, it would make it harder on me when I had to report you to the base commander."

Shibasaki's gratitude was perfectly sincere, but Hatano still looked like he'd been shot through the heart.

\*

The press conference that had been scheduled at the Library Base had been delayed drastically beyond schedule.

Reporters were packed into the auditorium, and getting more and more tense about the press conference that just wouldn't start. The air of the auditorium was hazy with tobacco smoke, and some reporters had even started heckling. "What the hell's going on?" "How long do you plan on making us wait?"

"It's no good," Orikuchi judged, as a reporter herself. "We can't delay any longer."

Yet there had still been no communication from Touma or his escort.

Genda, who was using a cane but only needed one hand to do so, and had recovered to the point that he could put on his uniform, stood backstage and gave a rapid-fire series of orders.

"We'll say that Touma-sensei was hospitalized due to a sudden illness! Commander Hikoe and the legal team will take point on the press conference! If you get a question about the verdict, or what we plan to do next, prevaricate, prevaricate, prevaricate! Orikuchi, come up with a good disease!"

"Let's go big and call it a heart attack. It wouldn't be unnatural at his age."

"Alright. Shibasaki! Go and tell his family beforehand that the press conference is going to be full of false information! Delta TV is going to be live-broadcasting it, I think!"

"Yes sir!"

Shibasaki ran to Touma's room, where his family was waiting.

The legal team huddled together for a brief consultation as they constructed a strategy for the press conference that was radically different from the one they had planned. The reason it was so brief was that they had already prepared for different scenarios, just in case--though everyone had prayed that they wouldn't have to use them.

Hikoe was given the responsibility of explaining the situation.

The moment the speakers walked out into the auditorium, a volley of camera flashes went off, almost as loud as the downpour outside.

Before they sat down, Hikoe, standing next to the head lawyer, took the microphone from the table and bowed his head. "We do apologize sincerely for the delay."

He was immediately peppered with questions like, "Where is Touma-sensei?" "Touma-sensei doesn't seem to be here...?!" Hikoe did not answer them individually, but faced the entire room as he began to speak.

"First of all, I'd like to explain the situation for the Library Force. During Touma-sensei's return to the base, he suddenly took ill and was rushed to the hospital. It was a heart attack brought on by stress. Consequently, he will not be able to make an appearance at this press conference. We ask for your understanding."

"Which hospital was he taken to!?"

"In order to ensure Touma-sensei's safety, we cannot release that information. As you all know, the Improvement Special Agency has already tried to abduct Touma-sensei while he was under the protection of the Library Force."

The explanation mollified the press conference for the moment, and the speakers found their seats and sat down.

"Would you give us your reaction to today's verdict?"

The head of the legal team fielded the rest of the questions.

"It was hard to accept. While the Media Improvement Committee has a history of using one case as precedent for forcibly broadening their mandate, this present case makes it obvious that they have

become a truly violent and oppressive censorship organization. Even if the term of the restrictions was shortened to one year, once that year is almost up they will certainly push hard for an extension. And our freedom of expression, which we retain thanks to the Improvement Committee's just-barely-constitutional excuse that they 'do not seize media until after it is distributed,' will truly be abolished. When people talk about governments keeping track of the activities of writers and dissidents, it looks exactly like this. If we accept this verdict, it will be used as a precedent to silence authors and critics who express opinions that are inconvenient for the Media Improvement Committee. We lost Touma-sensei's case, but another case is being brought, one that questions the validity of the Improvement Act itself."

"What do you think of the Media Improvement Committee's arguments?"

"Stoking the helpless terror of the citizenry following the reactor attack, and then taking advantage of that to try and create a precedent to suppress freedom of speech, is a disgraceful tactic. Certainly, the attack was unforgivable, and we should do what we can to prevent a reoccurrence. But it's unreasonable to force Touma-sensei to stop writing just because he writes sophisticated fiction. We shouldn't think of terrorism mitigation strategies and freedom of speech in the same category at all. Anyway, many experts have already pointed out that waiting until we have 'the full story' about the attack is illogical and impossible. If we let this attack rattle us to the point that we twist our constitution and put restrictions on freedom of speech, the terrorists will have won, and our entire nation will be disgraced."

"What do you think of the Supreme Court justices who handed down this verdict?"

"This verdict gives us a glimpse of the dark side of the Media Improvement Act--and tells us that it has spread as far as the Supreme Court. If their judgement were sound on this matter, our side would have won. Still, we find hope in the supporting opinion released with the verdict. It is the strongest criticism of the Media Improvement Act to date."

"The supporting opinion called for scrutinizing the Law of Library Freedom, as well..."

"Section 4 of the Library Laws was intended to combat the arbitrary expansion of the Media Improvement Act's authority, though instead it just escalated it. The laws were conceived of as a fortress to

stand against the Media Improvement Act, after all. So if the court questions the Improvement Act, I think it only makes sense to question Section 4 of the Library Laws as well."

"What developments will we see in Touma-sensei's case?"

"We will continue to shelter Touma-sensei, and challenge the Improvement Act itself with a lawsuit questioning its constitutionality, which is making its way through the courts now."

"What is Touma-sensei's condition?"

"Following his sudden heart attack, he'll need to rest for a while. The legal team and its support team will work together to push his suit forward..."

Though there had been a near-panic backstage before the press conference started, it progressed quietly once it began.

At the same time, Genda was playing his next move.

\*

It was after three o'clock in the afternoon when Hiraga received a phone call at the Tokyo Police Department's Criminal Investigation Division.

During his spare moments, he had been listening uneasily to Delta TV's affiliated radio station and its coverage of the press conference following the verdict in Touma Kurato's case, when a call came in from his "cousin Genda."

*Cousin? What the hell?* thought Hiraga as he took the call. He wasn't friendly enough with Genda to give him his cell phone number, so every time Genda needed another preposterous favor, he contacted Hiraga this way.

"What do you want this time?"

"You don't beat around the bush. I like that!" Genda's usual deep laugh boomed out, and then he asked for his latest outrageous favor. "Would you lend us an empty room at the Police Hospital?"

It was enough to deduce the truth.

"The press conference was a lie!"

"'Lie' sounds so disreputable. Let's just say that we're keeping things on hold for now."

*Genda-logic again*, Hiraga thought, rubbing his temple. He had to switch off his common sense during these conversations, or he would not be able to listen to Genda at all. It had been that way ever since Genda's ridiculous orders during Inamine's kidnapping.

"Where is Touma Kurato?"

"No idea! And even if I knew, I couldn't tell you!" Genda asserted, with refreshing passion for a man asking an unreasonable favor.

"You *lost* him!?"

"That's what I said, I don't know where he is. All we know is that the original plan was altered by unforeseen circumstances. But none of his bodyguards have returned, nor gotten in touch with us, so we don't even know what's happened to them. But we have to keep bluffing for now, especially for the benefit of the Improvement Committee."

It was an insane ploy...but the announcement at the press conference that had made Hiraga uneasy would make the Improvement Special Agency start scouring every hospital in Tokyo. They would undoubtedly want to figure out where Touma had been admitted, and seize him by whatever means necessary. And after they seized him? The Media Improvement Committee was the kind of organization where anything could happen after that.

"But they won't think of the Police Hospital right away. They'll only search it later. I want to put a Task Force member outside of a private room there, to make it look like he's guarding somebody."

This must be what he meant by "bluffing."

"That's all easier said than done..."

"Even in the Tokyo Police Department, there are those among the top brass who oppose the Improvement Act. I know you can get in touch with some of them. You can even name-drop the Library of Tomorrow Project, if you feel like it."

Genda had taken Hiraga's assistance as a given when he devised his plans. Hiraga, caught off-guard, couldn't resist him for long.

"Fine... I'll make it happen somehow, by nightfall," he promised recklessly. "But if they see through your little trick right away, there's nothing more I can do."

"No problem. We're talking to the Ministry of Defense about doing the same thing in some of the army hospitals too."

The favor Genda was asking Hiraga was just one piece of a plan to scatter decoys all over the city. While Hiraga had to give Genda credit for not hiding that fact--

"Even if it's just for politeness' sake, you could at least say I was your only hope!" Hiraga growled, and slammed the phone down.

"What was that all about, Hiraga-san?" the policewoman who had passed him the phone asked, sounding concerned.

"My wretched cousin," Hiraga spat. "He never gets in touch except to ask for a loan, and he never has any shame about it."

"That must be terrible," she replied in sincere sympathy, which only wearied Hiraga more.

\*

Ogata, Komaki, and Tedzuka returned to the Library Base, so exhausted that their soaked clothing might have been a blessing.

Ogata didn't tell them there was no time to rest. Without a word, the three of them headed to the locker room together, changing into dry uniforms before returning to the Task Force office. Perhaps their comrades had had enough time to discover the source of the leak.

Since the rest of the Task Force had been deployed, it was only Genda and Shibasaki they found waiting for them.

There they learned they were the first of the two groups who split up at the embassy to report in.

"You're kidding me," Tedzuka said, his voice rising in astonishment. "Does that mean they've been captured by the enemy...?"

"If they had, you wouldn't have been chased around half of Tokyo and returned to the base on the verge of collapse. They only need Touma-sensei; if Doujou and Kasahara had been left behind somehow, we'd know where they were. The Library of Tomorrow Project's informants haven't reported Touma-sensei captured either. They said that the Improvement Special Agency were still frantically trying to surround all of Tokyo's major embassies."

Tedzuka's shoulders relaxed visibly. His body language was still a little boyish--his signs of relief were more obvious than Komaki's or Ogata's.

"At the base, we waited as long as we could, until three, and then we bluffed our way through the press conference. We said that Touma-sensei wasn't there because the shock of the verdict had given him a heart attack and he had been rushed to the hospital. The Improvement Committee will presume that the stress of escaping their clutches was too much for him, and right about now they're probably scouring every hospital in the city. I just wish we had personnel here to help us search for our missing three..."

"So how did the asylum plans get leaked...?" Ogata asked, and Tedzuka's shoulders tensed up again.



Shibasaki answered, "Acting Director Hatano leaked the information."

The news took Ogata and Komaki aback, of course; they started, their eyes wide.

"Your brother had nothing to do with it," Shibasaki put in, probably for the benefit of the rigid Tedzuka. "Apparently at former Director Etou's invitation, he joined the Library of Tomorrow Project before its change in direction. But former Director Etou's doctrine of neutrality resonated with him more than Tedzuka Satoshi's vision, and he rebelled against the Library of Tomorrow Project's change in direction by doing what he did today. A board of enquiry has already expelled him from the Project."

A heavy silence descended over the room, proof that the betrayal had come from a direction that no one had foreseen.

"*Surely not him,*" they all wanted to say. It was that unbelievable. Each of them was deeply disappointed.

"Well then," Genda said, as if to banish the silence. "That's how things stand here. But we still haven't heard anything about what happened out there."

Ogata nodded and answered. "After we fled the Dutch embassy, we skipped over his second choice--the Swedish embassy--and made for the American. We knew the information had been leaked, but we hoped that they hadn't made it to his last choice yet, and we thought that they might have a hard time surrounding the American embassy, where security is usually so high. But they used two vans to fake an accident and block the entrance. We tried to make it inside before they had deployed their forces, but in the end we had to abandon our vehicle. That's where we split into two groups--our group was a decoy, and Doujou and Kasahara had Touma-sensei. We ran toward Toranomom Station, and they ran toward Tameike-Sanno Station. Komaki pretended to be Touma-sensei, and I yelled at Doujou to take his squadswoman back to the base, and I think we managed to draw the majority of the pursuers."

"I agree--if you hadn't, it wouldn't have taken you this long to shake them off."

"You're too kind. Still..." He trailed off, but they all knew what he meant.

*We thought Doujou and the others would be back already,* was written plainly across all of their faces.

"Alright, I think I've gotten the picture." As if to reset the mood of the room, Genda slapped his hand down on the table. Then he went over to the shelf, pulled down a subway map of Tokyo, and unfolded it across a nearby desk.

"Doujou's group headed toward Tameike-Sannou Station, you said? So of course they took the subway, but the question is, which line? There's either the Ginza Line or the Nanboku Line; if they were coming straight back to the base, they'd take the Ginza Line to Ginza and then choose another line there. Musashi-sakai<sup>15</sup> is surrounded, of course, so the Chuuou Line is out. Either way, there's no way for them to get back to the base on foot without us sending an escort, but with an escort the options are infinite. Even if we arranged to get on the subway and meet up at an appropriate station, if they went to Shibuya they could be on the Inokashira Line, or they could have gotten clever and transferred to the Keiou Line. Or they could have gone out to Shinjuku and used the Seibu Line to take the long way home. They had their pick of routes, but in spite of that, they haven't been in contact with the base. Which means..."

Genda jabbed a meaty finger at Nagatachou Station on the route map.

"If they transferred here to the Hanzoumon Line, the British embassy is right there. You can see it from the station exit. It was Touma-sensei's third choice."

"You're saying that Doujou and the others tried to storm the embassy?" Komaki asked.

"Tried, but screwed up. If they had succeeded, we would be seeing fireworks right about now. But we haven't heard that the Improvement Special Agency has captured them either. So they're still out there running."

"That doesn't sound like the kind of decision Officer Doujou would make. He would know how risky it was," Tedzuka protested. Komaki silenced him with a tiny motion of his hand.

Ogata looked down, somber. "...I was the one who advised him to get to an embassy by the end of the day. I said that by tomorrow, the Improvement Special Agency would have almost all the embassies in Tokyo under surveillance. I might have made him reckless."

"All you did was describe the situation accurately. And Doujou understood the situation and must have made the best decisions he

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<sup>15</sup> The station closest to the Kantou Library Base.

could, and Kasahara would have supported them. That's why there hasn't been any news about their capture," Genda said, and reached up to pat Ogata's shoulder. "They haven't fallen into the hands of the enemy. That, we know for sure. Shibasaki, go and let his family know."

"Yes, sir."

Shibasaki had just begun to walk away when the desk phone rang.

Genda was the only one who showed no reaction. The others all stared at the phone like it was a venomous snake.

Shibasaki was the one who eventually took the call.

"Hello, this is the Task Force office...yes. Yes, please put them through... This is the Library Task Force, I'm sorry for the wait."

Shibasaki leaned the phone against her ear; the ballpoint pen in her hand danced across the nearest notepad. From the words she repeated, it sounded like she was taking down an address.

Then she said, "Just a moment," pressed the hold button, and turned to Genda.

"It's an emergency room in Shinjuku. Doujou was rushed in, and just came out of emergency surgery."

"I'm going."

Komaki snatched the notepad out from under Shibasaki's hand and raced out of the room.

"I-I'm going too!" Tedzuka said, flustered, and chased after him.

"They said he hasn't regained consciousness yet..." Shibasaki called after them, but they were already out of earshot.

"Alright, I'll take it from here." Genda reached for the receiver, and Shibasaki handed it to him with a nod. Genda spoke for some time, also taking notes. Once he hung up, he turned to Ogata and Shibasaki.

"He took a bullet to his right thigh. The wound itself wasn't serious, but the bullet grazed an artery and he lost a lot of blood, and he was also out in the rain for a long time, so he came in with severe hypothermia. They have to take precautions so he doesn't come down with pneumonia."

"So even if they go they won't be able to talk to him," Shibasaki said, looking toward the door.

"Well, I suppose he couldn't help himself, once he knew where Doujou was. I get the impression they're close. And Tedzuka's pretty attached to Doujou."

"So attached he's clingy," Shibasaki agreed blithely, then asked, "...But Kasahara and Touma-sensei...?"

"They weren't with Doujou, it sounds like. That's what I'm going to find out now."

Genda started punching buttons on the phone.

They found the last piece of the puzzle in the Shinjuku outlet of a large chain bookseller.

Apparently Doujou and the others really had schemed to make for the British embassy. But they had slipped up and been forced to flee, and when Doujou had been shot by the Improvement troops in the process, they had sought refuge at that bookstore, where Touma was on friendly terms with the proprietor.

*That man who was a little on the short side--he's called Doujou-san? I was going to go with him in the ambulance because I thought he was already unconscious, but when they were loading him in he suddenly came to. He begged me not to come with him. He also said, if the Improvement Special Agency came asking around, to tell them that I had found him lying in the street outside the bookstore and called an ambulance. And to tell them that I hadn't seen Touma-sensei, or the woman.*

*He was so noble, especially for someone who looked so young. Someone who wanted to protect Touma-sensei and his sweetheart so much that he would go to such lengths to pretend he had been found lying alone in the street... I offered to at least get in touch with the Library Base, but he refused that, too. He wanted to do everything he could to keep our shop from being linked with him. He said the hospital would look at his ID and contact the base, and they would ask who had called the ambulance and contact us then. That's how uninvolved he wanted us to be.*

*Touma-sensei? He said he wanted to rent a car, so I showed him to the nearest rental car agency. I didn't inquire about his plans further, but it seemed the woman was going to drive them to Osaka.*

"Aha! Osaka!" Genda bellowed, slamming the phone down. "Touma-sensei and Kasahara are going to try and find their way into a consulate-general!"

Shibasaki was taken aback. "Heading to Osaka in this rain, with Kasahara driving!?" she said apprehensively. "...We had better check the news for any accidents on the highway."

"At the very least, we'll wait for them to call us first. If her phone rang and startled her at a bad time..."

"In theory, though, it's a brilliant scheme to snatch victory from the jaws of defeat. Though Kasahara would never think of driving to Osaka, in the middle of a typhoon no less..."

Ogata moaned. Shibasaki waved a hand at him.

"I meant Kasahara wouldn't have been smart enough to come up with the idea. Under these circumstances, the ones who could have connected Osaka and the consulates-general are Touma-sensei, and then Instructor Doujou. Instructor Doujou must have been the one who ordered them to leave today, by car, don't you think?"

"Something like that, yeah," Genda nodded. "Well, our enemies aren't idiots. Once they calm down, they'll realize there's one more avenue of refuge. If Touma-sensei and Kasahara had waited for the typhoon to end and the main long-distance routes to reopen, the enemy could have managed to put all three airports and all three bullet train stops under surveillance. They could always get off at Nagoya or Gifu-Hashima and go the rest of the way on the local lines, but in the meantime the enemy would have time to surround the main consulates-general."

"At any rate, I wish Kasahara would contact us. Especially since Touma-sensei doesn't carry a cell phone."

"We should have gotten him one and made him carry it. Whoops."

Would Touma approach the consulates-general in order of preference, like he had tried with with embassies? Or would he go in a different order? From the Library Base, there was no way to determine even such a simple fact. The same went for their route, or their plans once they arrived in Osaka. Genda wanted to call the Kansai Library Force and ask them for aid, but without knowing the movements of the people he was trying to help, all he would be able to do was make a vague request that the Kansai Library Force be ready to move.

"Well, we'd better start doing the maneuvering we can, based on the facts we have," Genda said, and picked up the phone.

\*

"...So the upshot is, Touma-sensei is all right. He's heading for Osaka right now, escorted by a member of the Library Task Force," Shibasaki reported.

Touma's wife, who was waiting in the room he had recently stayed in, burst into tears. Their son, a graduate student, held his mother.

"Don't cry, Mom. She just said he's fine." His encouraging words were belied by the quaver in his voice.

"Thank you, thank you..."

Shibasaki, who had only carried the message, offered a wan smile in response to her profuse thanks. She pointedly did not mention that the Task Force member escorting her husband was a volatile woman who was a big risk in all senses of the word.

"The typhoon has already mostly moved on from the west. The further they go, the safer they'll be. And it's not like the Media Improvement Committee has the right to inspect roads the way they inspect books."

But neither of them was listening to Shibasaki anymore.

"Wouldn't it be great if he managed to make it into a consulate after all, Mom?"

"Yes, indeed. It would just kill him if his writing was taken away from him..."

Shibasaki, sensing that she was in danger of overstaying her welcome, quietly rose. She gave a shallow, silent bow and left the room.

"Ooh, it's Shibasaki-san!"

She brushed off the excited swarm of men with practiced ease as she left the men's dorm. Since Touma had been staying there, she had had to visit many times, and this was always the result.

"Shoo! Shoo! I'm busy!"

*...Please make it there safely.*

It was still pouring rain. She opened her umbrella and headed back to the office.

*Make it there safely, and come home safely.*

*There are so many things we haven't talked about yet.*

*Instructor Komaki just started wearing a ring on his left hand, but it's not half as fun to giggle about it without my fellow spectator.*

*And I've just got to interrogate you about why on earth that shopkeeper thought you and Instructor Doujou were sweethearts.*

*My friends in the experimental intelligence department are keeping an eye on the news for information about highway accidents for me.*

*There hasn't been any bad news yet. So you've got to be okay.*

Willing it to be true, Shibasaki trotted through the rain.

\*

Tedzuka hadn't seen Komaki on edge since Marié had been assaulted by a pervert in the library.

That day had been the first time. Today was the second.

Komaki gripped the steering wheel as he drove, Tedzuka in the passenger's seat beside him. Though they were sitting side by side, Tedzuka barely dared to speak to him.

"Do you think Officer Doujou will be alright?" he whispered unwisely, unable to take the silence any longer.

"Of course he will," Komaki replied frostily.

The subtext was plain to read-- "*Why would you ask such a stupid question?*" Tedzuka didn't say another word.

Though night was approaching, the rain refused to slacken, which perhaps explained the erratic behavior of the cars around them. Komaki's fierce scowl at them was totally unlike his usual serene expression.

At last, Tedzuka's torment ended as the car arrived in Shinjuku and Komaki pulled into the parking lot of the hospital.

"We're here to see Doujou Atsushi, who just came out of emergency surgery."

When they asked at the reception desk, they were told that Doujou was in the intensive care unit. The surgery had been a success, but it had brought him to the edge of pneumonia.

If he contracted pneumonia after his body had been weakened by blood loss and surgery, the illness could prove more fatal than the original wound. It was a danger Tedzuka hadn't yet encountered in his life.

Komaki lowered himself onto a couch in front of the intensive care unit, so Tedzuka silently sat down beside him.

Komaki folded his hands on his knees, and then his head drooped until his forehead was almost touching them.

"...I'm sorry I made you uncomfortable."

Tedzuka hastily waved away his apology--though the ride to the hospital had in fact been plenty uncomfortable.

"...How many times does he have to do this until he's satisfied?"

"He" referred to Doujou, the man--Komaki's best friend--currently confined to intensive care.

"Has something like this happened once before, then?" Tedzuka asked diffidently.

Komaki gave him a ghost of a smile. Though he didn't lift his drooping head.

"'Once,' nothing. Out of all our contemporaries, counting the ones in the Defense Force, Doujou's been shot the most times. Whether because he has a strong sense of responsibility, or because he's just rash. ...Though," he sat up, and slumped back against the couch "--this is a new record for him. Maybe it was a mistake to send Kasahara-san along with him."

Tedzuka reacted sharply to his words. "Are you saying that this happened because Kasahara wasn't up to the task?"

If that was what Komaki meant, Tedzuka could not agree with him. Iku was not the brightest, it was true, but she never lost her nerve when things got tough. She would have been Doujou's right hand out there, Tedzuka was sure of it.

Komaki smiled wryly. "No, that's not what I meant. ...I forgot, you're Kasahara-san's friend too."

Vaguely reluctant to acknowledge the fact, Tedzuka said nothing.

"Do you remember, when you two first enlisted, when I told you that Doujou was much more like Kasahara-san in essentials than he was like you?" The conversation had taken place back before Tedzuka had recognized Iku's strengths, when he had been very prickly toward her.

Considering that Tedzuka had ludicrously proposed that the two of them try going out together, and considering all the times Tedzuka had been fed up with Iku, he had even less to say to this.

"Rash, and driven by emotions. Yes, Doujou is like that, deep down. --Or, was like that. He strives to be extremely cool and detached now, because he made the deliberate decision to be. He was different in the past. He was *exactly* like Kasahara-san," Komaki said with a smile. "Fierce in all his emotions, hot-blooded, reckless. For those of us who knew Doujou back in the old days, it's unbearably funny to watch him scold Kasahara-san. It's like watching Doujou scold his past self."

Tedzuka suddenly wondered if Iku would be more like that in the future. If she was just like Doujou had been in the past, in the future would she be just like Doujou was now? He couldn't imagine it.



"But, you know, sometimes when Doujou's around Kasahara-san, he gets caught up in her momentum and reverts to his past self. It's amusing for the rest of us, but at the same time, it's dangerous. Two Kasahara-sans is scary when you really think about it, isn't it?"

"Very," Tedzuka replied instantly. It was terrifying to even imagine.

"I think, probably, that if I had been the one to go with Doujou today, I would have propounded on the importance of avoiding risks and come back to the base without any difficulty, no matter how gung-ho Touma-sensei was. Doujou would have decided that I had a point, and gotten Touma-sensei to give up. But Doujou's been an ardent fan of Touma-sensei's for a long time. If Touma-sensei had been intent on getting to an embassy, Doujou would have been swayed by his determination. And if Kasahara-san had been the one standing next to him at that moment, she just would have said, 'Let's go for it.' She would have given Doujou a push."

Tedzuka thought for a long while, then said, "Is that why they're so incompatible?"

"No, it's the other way around. They're entirely *too* compatible," Komaki declared. "That's why they went for it. They trusted each other, without question, thoroughly, to the end. They gave it everything they had, and this was the result."

"Instructor Doujou's injury...you mean?"

"No. You don't see Kasahara-san or Touma-sensei here, do you? Kasahara-san took up Doujou's mission after he had to withdraw. They still haven't given up on carrying out Touma-sensei's wishes. They conspired together on this nonsense, and there's going to be still more nonsense before all this is through."

From their friends' perspective, they were indeed a nerve-racking team, Tedzuka agreed. *How far are you going to take this, you maniac?*

And then he remembered Shibasaki, who had a better claim to the position of Iku's friend than he or anyone else, and though he knew she wouldn't appreciate it, his heart still fluttered with concern for her.

## Chapter 5, The Denouement

\*

The navigation system instructed them to get on the Tokyo-Nagoya Expressway, but Touma was of the opinion that they should take the Chuuou Expressway instead.

"It's a bit of a detour in terms of pure distance, but the Chuuou should be less congested. I imagine more and more cars will be getting on the Toumei as the typhoon slackens, since it's the main artery for many major cities along the Pacific Ocean, but I don't think the Chuuou will get as crowded. And anyway, from Shinjuku, it's easier to get on the Chuuou."

"Wow, you know a lot about this."

"Because of my work. There are scenes one can't write unless one knows this sort of thing. If you get on the Shinjuku Line of the Shuto Expressway and head in the direction of Hachiouji, it should connect up with the Chuuou."

"Got it. ...So how on earth do I get to the Shinjuku Line!?"

Touma, flustered by Iku's sudden panic, ripped open a map, but it was upside-down.

"*Sensei*, the *navigation*! Reset the *navigation*!"

"A-All right! For now, just stay close to the Tokyo Government Office! The Shuto interchange should be close by!"

"Which is the Tokyo Government Office?! The one that looks like it could transform into a robot?!"

"The tallest one!"

"I can't see the tops of the buildings in this rain!"

The navigation system's voice input was having a hard time recognizing Touma's thick voice, but it picked up Iku calling out "Tokyo Government Office" and ended up resetting itself.

"No! Don't listen to *me*! Go to Osaka Station! Osaka Station!"

"*ROUTING FROM--TOKYO GOVERNMENT OFFICE--TO--OSAKA STATION.*"

This pandemonium was finally settled when Iku spied a green highway sign through the pouring rain. Even with Iku's 20-10 vision, the heavy rain kept her from being able to read the sign until they had almost passed it, but--

"There you are, you son of a bitch!"

Iku wrenched the steering wheel around, following the sign's directions to the interchange. The navigation system scolded her repeatedly as it tried to guide her to the Tokyo-Nagoya Expressway instead, until Iku pulled onto the road toward Hachiouji and it finally changed its route, announcing, "*MERGING ONTO--SHUTO EXPRESSWAY--SHINJUKU LINE. CONTINUE TOWARD--HACHIOUJI.*"

"Ha! You've finally surrendered to the power of the human intellect!" Iku growled at the navigation system.

In the passenger seat, Touma couldn't quite contain his laughter. "I would call that more of a magnificent show of untamed instinct than intellect."

"Not you too, Touma-sensei! I'm tired of being compared to a wild animal," she said. Now that she was on the expressway and had attention to spare, she retorted, "You're the one who couldn't reset the navigation system!"

"I'm an old man who doesn't even have a cell phone. What on earth were you expecting?"

"But in your books, your main character is always using cutting-edge technology like it's no big deal!"

"It's because my son is young, and *he* can use those things 'like it's no big deal.' He's an important collaborator while I'm writing. Thanks to him, I can at least write about such things without making a fool of myself. As long as you know what a machine can and can't do, and the basics of its operation, you can write about it in a novel."

"Ugh, my illusions are shattered."

"If I needed real-life experience to write about everything in my books, I would have had to get licensed to fly helicopters, and airplanes, and such. But there aren't many people who would get a helicopter pilot's license for the sole purpose of writing a novel."

When he put it that way, it made sense.

"But not even being able to use a cell phone or a car navigation system..."

"Pardon me, but even a young woman like you had to wrestle with the navigation system, didn't you?"

She had no defense against that cutting remark.

"I write all my manuscripts on the computer now, but if something goes wrong I still have to ask my son for tech support."

"...Won't it be inconvenient then, being separated from him?"

She couldn't come out and ask, *Won't you miss him?*

"Despite appearances, I do know enough English to be able to explain a computer malfunction to a repairperson without much trouble. Anyway, our family has never been very hesitant about going overseas. Our son has done multiple homestays--so I don't think this will tear our family apart. Even my son's world has gotten bigger, since he entered college."

His wise old eyes had seen through to Iku's true concern. Even Iku hadn't gone home to visit her parents since her third year of college until last year during the Ibaraki Prefectural Art Exhibition, and she hadn't really missed them too much.

"Keep going toward Hachiouji."

Even taking into account the fewer number of cars that were out in the typhoon, traffic was indeed streaming more quickly along the Chuou Expressway. And since Iku wasn't at all used to driving, the route without the frenzy and stress of traffic congestion once they got out of Tokyo was the optimal choice.

Since Touma could also drive, they decided they would nap in shifts, except when they stopped for breaks.

Touma assembled a light meal from their provisions, then tilted his seat back, draped a blanket over himself, and fell asleep. It was only a little after four o'clock, but perhaps he was used to sleeping at need, for it wasn't long before his deep breathing became a low snore.

Around the time they left Tokyo and entered Yamanashi, the rain slackened. At the junction at Ootsuki, the navigation system again tried to order her to veer back toward the Tokyo-Nagoya Expressway, but she shut it up by obstinately pointing the car toward Koufushi.

Her flight response had her driving a little fast, so they made it out of the Kantou area and into Nagano more quickly than expected. It was evening, but the rain had stopped.

She pulled into the Suwako rest stop and roused Touna.

"Sensei, let's take a bathroom break."

"Mmm, all right...where are we?"

"The Suwako rest area."

"Ah, then next we'll be turning toward Nagoya at the Okaya junction." To all appearances Touna had been fast asleep. He rubbed at his eyes and picked up his glasses from where they had been resting on his chest. "Looks like the rain has stopped."

"Yes, it stopped around the time we got to Yamanashi."

They got out of the car and headed for the rest stop. On the way, Touma looked at his watch.

"So it's a little under three hours since we left Tokyo?"

"Are we going too slow? I'm sorry."

"Oh no, considering this rain, you're doing just fine. Everything would be lost if we got in an accident or drew the attention of the police. The most important thing is to proceed cautiously, especially as night falls."

Touma was still in the bathroom when Iku had finished and come out. Thinking of using the moment to contact the Library Base, she fished her phone out of the pocket of her jeans. It was totally dry on the outside--but what about the inside?

Her cell phone was supposed to be waterproofed against the rigors of daily life. Iku rolled the dice and pressed the power button--but the screen only flickered for a moment, and then went dead. Apparently the internals had water damage, and no wonder, since she had been out in that storm until she was soaked through.

"Dammit...what are we going to do...?"

Touma, who had just come out of the bathroom, asked, "What happened?"

"I was going to contact the Base, but it turns out my phone is dead..."

"I see. You could use a pay phone..."

"No, I can't."

Iku squeezed her eyes shut and thought hard. --*If I were Doujou.*

*If I were Doujou, I wouldn't make calls over a pay phone under these circumstances.*

"...After losing you, Touma-sensei, the first place the Improvement Special Agency will put under surveillance is the Kantou Library Base. Right now, they pretend that it's technically impossible to tap our cell phones or land lines, but as a federal organization, they have access to special wiretapping equipment."

"Oh, I see... But if that's the case, why would it be okay to use your cell phone?"

"Library Force members who want cell phones are required to use ones enhanced by the Logistical Support Division with anti-wiretapping codes. Land lines used by the Library Force are also resistant to wiretapping. But pay phones..."

Calling the Kantou Library Base from a pay phone while the Improvement Special Agency was surveilling it would be like broadcasting Touma's whereabouts from a sound truck. Nor had they prepared any secret code phrases for this eventuality.

But they just *had* to get in touch with the Library Base. Doujou had been close to passing out when Iku and Touma had left, hanging on to consciousness by sheer willpower. She couldn't count on Doujou being able to explain what was going on.

"Aha!" Iku exclaimed, racing for the phone booth. Touma was left blinking in her wake; she had no time to lose explaining her idea to him.

She looked up the right three-digit number in the phone book, and then punched in 115.

"Hello, this is the NTT Telegram Service."

"Excuse me, can telegrams be delivered by the end of today!?"

The operator remained steadfastly perky and unfazed by Iku's desperate questions.

"Yes, if you order before seven o'clock in the evening, they will be delivered the same day."

Iku looked at her watch. It was almost thirty minutes until seven.

"Er...can I order one over a pay phone?"

"Yes, though you will have to pay by credit card."

"Got it. Thank you!"

She hung up for the time being and ran back to Touma.

"Sensei, a telegram! Let's send a telegram! If we order it by seven, it'll be delivered today! The Library Base receives truck and motorcycle deliveries well into the night, so a telegram delivery won't look suspicious at all!"

An intense discussion followed. How had the plans for his flight into an embassy been leaked? Had they found the source of the leak at the Base? And if they hadn't, should they conceal their current destination? And so on.

Taking their discussion into account, Iku composed the telegram. They would use Iku's credit card to pay for it; as Doujou had said, there was the dangerous possibility that Touma's card was under unlawful surveillance. But the Improvement Special Agency probably hadn't discovered Iku's role yet.

Iku polished the telegram as best she could, but she wondered if the meaning would get through. There was no point in thinking too

much about it now. They should be able to make do even if they didn't have backup.

While they were near a phone, Touma suggested they also make reservations for a hotel tonight. If they continued on from here, it would be the dead of night when they arrived in Osaka. They might not be able to find a hotel that would let them stay if they had to search for lodgings then.

They pored over the map the book shop owner had provided, and used the pay phone a few more times, this time to call directory assistance. Even if the Improvement Special Agency was already tightening the net in Osaka somehow, they would be targeting the Library Force facilities. There was no way they would be wiretapping hotel phone lines indiscriminately, and there would be nothing about the anonymous Iku's reservation to make them suspicious.

Even so, they decided to do the unexpected and try for a room at the Hilton right across from Osaka Station. It would never occur to the Improvement Special Agency that their most wanted man in Japan was staying at a top-notch hotel in the fanciest district in Osaka.

"If we're staying at the Hilton," Touma said, "we might as well go for broke and reserve an executive room."

Iku twitched at the idea of staying in a room even more expensive than a suite, but if Touma was suggesting it, he must have a good reason.

"Executive rooms have a dedicated reception desk on an upper floor. It'll make checking in and out smoother, and make it that much less likely that we'll be spotted."

When he put it that way, it was a strong argument. Apparently Touma had stayed in such hotels before. Iku asked if he had holed up in a hotel room to finish a novel, which was what she imagined authors did, but he smiled wryly and replied, "No, my wife and I splurged a little during an anniversary trip a few years ago, that's all."

"I'm sorry you can't be with your wife for this stay. Do you mind a double room?"

"I should be asking you that question."

Satisfied with his answer, Iku quickly called the hotel to make the reservation. Just as she'd hoped, an executive double room was available.

"We're sort of far away, and since we're coming by car it'll be late at night before we arrive, is that okay? It might be after midnight."

She was told to please call the hotel if she thought they would arrive sooner after all, but at least she was able to reserve a room.

Iku hung up the phone and breathed a sigh. Touma looked at her anxiously and said, "If you're getting tired, I can take a turn driving."

"Oh, no, I'm still fine to drive." Iku scratched her head and laughed. "I was just thinking, wow, it really makes a difference when you have a big war chest. If this was a vacation I was taking myself, I would never in a million years make a last-minute reservation for a Hilton executive room. I'd look for a cheap hotel, and if I couldn't find one with a vacancy I'd spend the night in an internet cafe or something."

"Can you really sleep in an internet cafe?"

"Lately there are places with showers and stuff, and they even serve food, even though it's usually prepackaged--so yes, you can spend a night there, no problem. The cubicles have locking doors, after all."

"Ha ha, is that right!" Touma nodded to himself, looking impressed. "But anyway, I still think I should take a turn driving. Today's escape must have taken its toll on even an excellent Defense Force member like you. You were the one driving through all the rain, after all."

Touma's forthright words made her suddenly aware of the exhaustion she hadn't even noticed until now.

"I'm old, so I can't push myself too hard. So I need you rested as soon as possible, or else I'll be in a pickle."

"All right."

Touma was right. Iku nodded obediently, and when they got back to the car, she took the passenger seat. While Touma drove over to a gas station and asked for the tank to be filled, Iku sat beside him and ate hungrily from their provisions. By the time Iku had scarfed down an onigiri and a sandwich and guzzled some tea, the gas tank was full, and Touma pulled out of the service area.

Once she had seen Touma merge onto the slow lane of the highway, Iku put the passenger seat down and pulled the blanket up to her chest.

She was even more exhausted than she realized. The moment she closed her eyes and let herself be rocked by the motion of the car, she could feel her consciousness quickly ebbing away. It was a sign of how deeply she would sleep.



\*

The same day, at nine at night--

"Where the hell is Kasahara!?" Genda shouted, fiercely as a *namahage*<sup>16</sup>, while he paced around and around the empty office. The rest of the Task Force members were deployed to their fake guard posts at the police hospital and the army hospital.

"Stop clomping around on those crutches. You're going to scratch the floor," said Ogata, giving Genda the scolding that Doujou might have given him if he was around. The rest of Doujou's squad was at an emergency hospital in Shinjuku--Doujou's presence there had been verified, and Komaki and Tedzuka had gone to see him.

According to Komaki's report, Doujou was on the verge of pneumonia in addition to his gunshot wound, which made Genda worry about the well-being of the other two who had been with him--but Iku, who was missing along with Touma, had not yet contacted them.

Genda's best information was that they were headed to Osaka by car, but whether this information would be confirmed or not was another question.

That was when Shibasaki came running in.

"Commander Genda, this is how she's getting in touch with us! The dorm manager just delivered it to me!"

Shibasaki handed it over to Genda; it was a telegram. A telegram with a sound module and a fancy design.

It was addressed to Shibasaki Asako, from Shibasaki Asami.

Since Shibasaki hadn't yet untied the pretty ribbon around the telegram, it was clear that she had no relative by that name. "Shibasaki Asami" was Iku's alias.

"Why would she need such elaborate means to..." Genda frowned.

"What if her cell phone was damaged during their escape?" Ogata suggested. "It was the kind of downpour that overwhelmed everyday waterproofing. After we separated, Tedzuka's phone was ruined by the rain too. He was pretty horrified."

"What!?" Shibasaki squawked suddenly. Genda and Ogata both turned their frowns onto her.

"What was that, all of a sudden?" Genda asked.

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<sup>16</sup> Remember, a *namahage* is the Japanese ogre that Genda is compared to sometimes. There's a New Year's tradition in Japan for men to go door to door dressed as *namahage* roaring, "Are there any naughty children here?" Three guesses who the naughty child is here!

Shibasaki laughed weakly. "Oh, I, uh...well, I was just thinking, that's too bad for him. It'll be hard to restore all that data."

"Well, this isn't the time to worry about something like that."

Shibasaki nodded. "No sir."

Ogata continued, "She couldn't have called us from a pay phone; she'd be worried about the Improvement Special Agency listening in on the call. But to think of a telegram? That's genius."

"We had better commend her when she gets home," Genda said as he opened the telegram. It immediately started playing "Happy Birthday."

The three of them peered at the contents of the telegram. Genda made a face.

"What the hell is this? It's like it was written by a fourth-grader."

"It's Kasahara doing the best she can," Shibasaki said, unexpectedly coming to Iku's defense. "Kasahara doesn't know the situation here, nor where the information leak was. But no matter who the traitor was, she must have figured that if she sent a telegram pretending to be a relative of mine, it would be delivered directly to me. And even in the worst case, where someone opened it and read it, she made sure that it looked like nothing more than a birthday telegram."

"Well, I admit, I do understand what she was trying to say, but..."

The telegram had continued to play its tinny melody while they held it open, and suddenly it seemed that Genda and Ogata had had enough of it. Their faces turned dangerous before Shibasaki's eyes.

"Hey, where the hell's the sensor? Rip it out, Ogata!"

"Yes sir!"

Ogata opened a nearby desk drawer, pulled out a roll of duct tape, and stuck it over the silvery light sensor. The music that Iku had specially included was silenced less than five minutes after it had arrived.

"In any case, one thing that's clear is that they're on the Chuuou Expressway heading for Osaka. Shibasaki, decipher the rest," Genda ordered.

"Yes, sir." Shibasaki picked up the now-silent telegram.

"You can use one of our computers here."

"No, just in case, I'd better use the notebook in my room. I don't want someone stumbling over my search history."

Anyone on the base could enter the Library Task Force office if they wanted to, which made her nervous from a security standpoint. Hatano probably wasn't the last traitor in their midst.

Iku had racked her brains (though she had none) to come up with this clever message. It would all be for naught if they didn't put their full effort into deciphering it.

...But putting that aside for the moment.

"Damn him," she spat, walking down the hall after she had bowed her way out of the office. "Tedzuka, you idiot."

Shibasaki wasn't worried that anyone would overhear her, so she let the name of the one she was damning fall from her lips.

The cell phone that Tedzuka had ruined? It was Shibasaki's.

Most of the information on her phone was duplicated on her computer or in her paper address book. Still--

"If I can't restore the data, I'm going to make you re-enter all of it on top of buying me a new phone!"

Shibasaki's Library Force contacts alone exceeded a hundred phone numbers. Adding in personal acquaintances and connections, she would need two hundred numbers entered at a minimum.

Well, it might be fun to watch Tedzuka suffer.

It wasn't much of a silver lining, but she was smiling before she knew it.

\*

"Can I ask you to take over driving again soon?"

Touma made the request just before they reached Sekigahara.

They had gotten on the Meishin Expressway, which crossed Nagano Prefecture, descended into Gifu Prefecture, and then even grazed the northern corner of Aichi Prefecture. Touma had shouldered the driving for her until it reentered Gifu Prefecture.

It was approximately two and a half hours since they had left the Suwako rest stop, and about nine o'clock. Thanks to her short but sound sleep, Iku's fatigue had more or less lifted.

"I'll pull in to the Yourou rest stop," Touma said, switching from the slow lane to the rest area's exit lane. "There's been a bit more traffic since we got on the Meishin, but it's moving at a good clip. Even driving in the slow lane at the speed of traffic, I've been getting up to 100 kilometers per hour."

"That's good..." Iku said, still a little foggy with sleep. She opened the map. "It's not much farther from here, is it." By her rough calculation, they had another 150 kilometers to go. On the highway, it would take them less than two hours. "I'll drive the rest of the way."

By this point, the typhoon had subsided, and the sky was clear enough that the stars were visible. The rest stop was deserted; indeed, there would be few cars coming from the east on a day when a typhoon hit Tokyo.

They went to the bathroom again, and when they returned to the car they reset the car navigation. There would be no repeat of the disgraceful scene as they tried to get on the Shuto Expressway. Their destination was the Osaka Hilton Hotel.

"Be careful when you get off the highway in Osaka. The streets are like a maze."

"Um, just how bad are they...?"

"I've never personally driven there either, but think of how confusing the roads in Shinjuku or Shibuya are, and you've got a pretty good idea of what it's like around Osaka Station. There'll be a lot of cars parked on the streets at night, though not as many as there were at one time."

"Eek!"

Iku, who had struggled just to get on the highway in Shinjuku, was naturally placing more and more trust in the car navigation system.

"We'll be off the expressway in two hours. I find it hard to imagine that there would be traffic at this hour. With any luck, we'll be inside the hotel while it's still technically today."

"All right!" Iku slapped her cheeks to psych herself up. "Pray for luck, then! Here we go!" She started the engine.

Since they had driven 200 kilometers since Suwako, they bought gas again before leaving the rest stop. Since the gas station was practically empty, their dutiful refueling at a rest stop would actually save them time.

They pulled out of the Yourou rest stop, and not ten minutes had passed before they entered Shiga Prefecture. Soon after that came the Maibara junction.

At the junction, they continued straight toward Hikone, and Iku moved over into the passing lane. According to the speedometer, they were going 120 kilometers per hour--a good clip, probably possible due to the lighter traffic at night. The road was completely dry by

then, so there was no danger of sliding. Compared to being in the middle of the typhoon, it was a relief to be driving in such favorable conditions.

*Okay, a local driver, where's a local driver?*

Iku checked that the car in front of her had Shiga license plates, and then began to follow it at an appropriate distance. When she had gotten her license, her father had taught her: in unfamiliar territory, drive behind a local driver. You could usually avoid speeding tickets by going along with the flow of traffic, but local drivers knew the quirks of the road, so it was always better to follow them. Since her move to Tokyo she had had remarkably few opportunities to drive, but she had found it to be true--when local drivers slowed down for no discernible reason, there was usually a bump in the road, or bad visibility, or a speed trap.

According to the map, they were now rounding the southern shore of Lake Biwa.

She suddenly wondered: were there any places where they could have stopped to see the lake, if they had been driving in the daytime? Iku had never seen Lake Biwa.

But the highway barrier hid the scenery; all they could see was the darkening shadows of the mountains.

At long last they had made it through Kyoto. They stopped for a final rest and refueling at the Suita rest stop. They were an hour and a half from Sekigahara, and it was after 11. According to their map, they were less than thirty minutes from their destination, so they called the Hilton to notify the hotel that they would manage to arrive just before midnight after all.

At the Toyonaka interchange they got on the Hanshin Expressway toward Ikeda, then followed the navigation system's instructions to get off at the Umeda exit. Iku immediately fell into hysteria.

"Umeda!? It told me to get off at the Umeda exit, not the Osaka exit--is that right!?"

"Around here, Osaka and Umeda refer to the same place, they just have different names!"

"The same place has two different names!? That should be *illegal!*"

As soon as they got downtown, the navigation system started issuing rapid-fire directions.

"Waaaaah!"

Forced to take several hated right turns on unfamiliar roads, Iku frantically tried to follow the arrow on the navigation display as the drivers around her honked their horns.

"I'll watch the display! Kasahara-san, *you* watch the road!"

In the end, both the navigation system and Touma had to give her directions, but she finally reached their destination and pulled into the Hilton's parking lot. They introduced themselves to the parking attendant, who guided them to a parking space.

Since they would be returning the car in Osaka tomorrow, they took out all their luggage, from the shoulder bag Doujou had handed her to the snacks the shop owner had provided.

They scrambled to the front desk on the first floor. "I'm Kasahara--I called earlier," she said, using her own name as she had for their reservation. As expected, they were invited to check in at the private reception desk on the 32nd floor, and a bellboy took their luggage and guided them to an elevator.

The private reception desk was a small, one-person counter at the entrance to a bar and lounge. It suggested that guests were few and the service was correspondingly attentive.

"I'll fill in my father's information too."

Touma had casually wandered away from the desk. Iku filled in her parents' address and her own name on the registration form. For Touma, she wrote her own father's name, Kasahara Katsuhiko.

She had been told beforehand that the hotel required a deposit of double the room charge, so she counted out the appropriate number of bills and handed them to the woman at the desk. They would settle their account and get the balance back at checkout.

They were in Room 3112. They were given a gold key card in exchange for their paperwork, and the bellboy resumed leading them. Iku carried the shoulder bag herself, but let the bellboy take the rest as he guided them to their room. They went down one flight of stairs, past a bank of elevators, and down a long hallway.

As if she really were a bustling daughter, she turned to Touma, who was slumped over and slowly bringing up the rear, and urged him, "Father, come *on*! It's already tomorrow! We have to hurry up and get to sleep!"

"You can badger me all you like, but I'm tired and this is as fast as I'm going to go."

Touma's ad-lib was amazing. Iku tried again.

"It's not my fault that she died suddenly! We finally got to the hotel, so quit complaining!"

It might have been indelicate, but when you needed an excuse for an abrupt arrival, there was nothing better than death.

"Still, I wish she hadn't kicked the bucket in the middle of our vacation. Thanks to our sudden destination change, we don't even have any funeral clothes."

"This is a city. There's got to be somewhere you can buy funeral clothes."

Expanding on their little play, she asked the bellboy.

"Pardon me, is there a store around here where you can buy funeral clothes?"

"If you go down to the first floor and exit on the Hilton East Plaza side, there's a Hanshin department store to the east. There's also a Daimaru department store inside Osaka Station. Both of them open at ten o'clock," the bellboy informed them kindly.

After the bellboy had guided them to their room on the 31st floor and left them, Iku bowed deeply to Touma.

"I'm sorry for springing that ad-lib on you like that."

"No need to apologize. I think I acquitted myself pretty well, if I do say so myself."

"Yes, you were perfect!" Iku said, setting the shoulder bag down on the bed.

She suggested to Touma that he take a shower. Since they didn't seem to have a choice, she had been resigned to go a day without a change of underwear, but when she emptied the paper bag of provisions that the shop owner had given them in Shinjuku, she found one set each of men's and women's socks and underwear, bundled together. The women's underwear, at least, must have been awkward for him to buy, she reflected gratefully.

"Sensei, the shop owner bought us some underwear."

"Oh, thank goodness."

Touma apparently hadn't undressed yet, for he opened the bathroom door and took the underwear. He'd probably cut the tag off with the complimentary razor.

"Have a good long soak in the bath, okay? You'll have some of your energy back once you've gotten warmed up again."

All would be lost if Touma collapsed on her now.

With the deep sound of water filling the bathtub in the background, Iku opened the shoulder bag and examined its contents.

As she had felt while she had fumbled through the bag on the train, there was one SIG Sauer P220, one submachine gun, and three spare magazines for each. A first-aid kit, a little thinner now that the triangle bandage had been used. There were scissors for cutting bandages inside, so she used them to cut the tag off her own underwear.

Iku glanced at the telephone on the bedside table. Once they had reached the hotel and had a chance to settle down, she had felt a growing desire to get in touch with the base.

Was Doujou alright? Was he out of surgery yet? She could find out the answers with one quick phone call.

But.

Iku walked over to the window, as if to put distance between herself and temptation. The window had a sliding paper screen in front of it, though it was still open. She could see the Osaka Maru building directly in front of her, familiar from the number of times she had checked the Osaka map, and if she shifted her gaze a little, she could see a slanted billboard for a famous Osaka consumer loan company that she had seen on variety TV shows. At Iku's salary, the view from the 31st floor was a rare privilege, but she was in no mood to enjoy it. After just a couple of glances, she pulled the sliding screen closed.

Iku sat down on the bed closer to the window. The mirror on the desk across from her reflected her weary visage.

Pinned to the collar of her shirt was a rank insignia two ranks higher than her own. *I'll lend you mine*, Doujou had said, pinning the insignia with two *camomille* flowers to her collar with pale fingers.

She pressed her fingers to the insignia. Doujou was here with her.

*Don't cry. Smile. You're in charge from here on out.*

*It'll be okay. You can do it*, Doujou had told her.

The cell phone she could use to call the Library Force was broken, and as a last resort she had sent a telegram. She decided she wouldn't try to contact the Library Force again.

She would have to do it alone; there was no other option. And Doujou had told her that she could do it.

*So I'll do it, all by myself. No matter what happens, I'll get Touma-sensei into his first-choice consulate-general. Extravagance, folly, and recklessness are the Library Task Force's core competencies.*



Smiling was impossible, but she could face herself in the mirror. She had been told not to cry, so she didn't. No matter how worried she was about Doujou's condition.

Touma came out of the bathroom after about thirty minutes. Instead of a *yukata*<sup>17</sup>, he was wearing a long button-down sleep shirt as loungewear. Iku picked up her loungewear and underwear and traded places with him, then started running a small stream of hot water into the tub.

There was a small wicker hamper on the counter, which Touma had perhaps used. "Wow, this might be the first time I've been to a hotel with a hamper in the bathroom!" There was a scale, too, but she decided not to mention this discovery. She took off her clothes and bulletproof vest and put them in the hamper, then put her towel and loungewear on top of them.

There were two bars of soap provided, so just for kicks Iku opened a fresh bar and washed her face. Apparently they'd have to share the shampoo, conditioner, and body wash, for there was only one small tube of each. She carried them over to the bathtub, which had filled to a satisfactory level, and sank her body into the hot water.

She soaked until her muscles had loosened, and then massaged them for good measure. It would be no laughing matter if her muscles were sore tomorrow. There were already purple bruises dotting her body from where she had been knocked around.

She washed her body and hair, let the water drain, then used the shower head to rinse off herself and the bathtub. She had just toweled off and dressed when she realized.

"I wonder if they have face lotion or something like that..."

Since she rarely got chances to wear makeup on regular days (it would be ridiculous to wear it while on patrol, never mind during training), she wasn't bothered that she'd have to go without it tomorrow, but she was obviously a little concerned about her skin care.

She checked the collection of toiletries, wondering if there was some kind of aftershave lotion, and found one foil pouch each of makeup remover, face cleanser, and lotion. *Fancy hotels are something else*, she thought as she gratefully applied the lotion. Since she wanted to have some left for tomorrow morning, she only used about half, and propped up the remainder in a corner of the counter.

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<sup>17</sup> A light cotton kimono, worn as a robe after bathing.

She dressed and left the bathroom, and found Touma looking at a long sheet of paper that looked like a form.

"What's that, Touma-sensei?"

When she peered over at it, it turned out to be a hotel door hanger. But it was much longer than the usual "Do not disturb" or "Please make up my room" signs, and a paper door hanger seemed strangely cheap for such a fancy hotel.

"It's a breakfast menu. If we hang it on our doorknob before 3 AM, they'll bring us breakfast tomorrow morning at the time we specify. I thought it would be nice to not have to go down to the lounge to get breakfast."

"It sounds great!" Iku didn't have to think twice. The room came with all-you-could-eat buffet meals, but the lounge she had glimpsed at check-in had seemed a little small (probably because there weren't that many executive rooms to begin with), so there was nowhere to sit where they would be hidden from other guests. There was no guarantee that one of the other guests wouldn't recognize Touma from the news.

"It seems like the kind of lounge where there might be only foreign guests sometimes, so we wouldn't have to be on our guard as much..."

"No, there's always that million-to-one chance. It may cost us double, but the Force always says not to be stingy when it comes to security."

Compared to the time when Inamine had been kidnapped and the Library Force had bought an entire building in a new housing development to get him back, a few thousand yen was nothing.

Iku, who didn't feel like herself unless she had a few grains of rice in the morning, chose a Japanese-style breakfast. Touma, who had a small appetite, chose a rice gruel combo, then hung the menu on the doorknob outside. They requested breakfast at 8 AM, so they would wake up at 7.

They climbed into their beds and turned out the lights, and soon Touma's loud snores filled the room. He had plainly been exhausted.

Iku herself was too exhausted for the snoring to bother her, and quickly followed Touma into sleep.

\*

And then it was 7 o'clock the next morning.

As soon as the alarm rang, Iku felt along the headboard for the alarm clock and turned it off. She reached under the covers and straightened her sleep-rumpled loungewear, then got out of bed.

"Sensei, it's morning. I'll go into the bathroom and get ready first."

She gathered her clothing and shut herself inside the bathroom. As she washed her face and brushed her teeth, she could hear the TV from the other room. Touma must have turned on the news. She could hear him flipping through channels, so he was probably looking for today's roaming report.

How would the events of yesterday be reported to the world? Iku hastily finished dressing and went back into the bedroom.

"Apparently I'm at a Tokyo hospital recovering from a heart attack," Touma said. "For my safety, they're not releasing the name of the hospital."

He laughed, and Iku laughed too. The tactic had Genda's fingerprints all over it. But the Improvement Committee wouldn't be gullible enough to believe the lie. She had to believe they would be searching for them in Osaka too. They had not passed beyond the need for caution.

Touma dressed, and soon breakfast arrived on a wheeled cart. A table near the window was pushed into the middle of the room and the cart was parked beside it.

They opened the sliding screen in front of the window and ate their breakfast. When they had finished, they called to have the cart retrieved. Once the room clerk had wheeled it out, Iku called the rental car agency where they had planned to drop off their car. She had arranged to return the car first thing this morning, but she couldn't leave Touma alone in the hotel, and there wasn't enough time to check out first.

She told the agency that something had come up and there was just no way she could return the car on time, and requested that someone come to Hilton to pick it up from her. At first they were very reluctant to do so, but when she offered to pay extra to cover the cost of refueling, a deal was struck.

"All right. When you arrive at the front desk, can you give me a call? Ask for Kasahara in room 3112."

The agency was close by, so they said someone would be by in twenty minutes. While she was waiting, Iku gathered the belongings they intended to discard. Most of it was the provisions the bookshop

owner had gotten for them. It was regrettable, but they wouldn't be able to carry around the blanket, or the extra clothing.

She packed them inside a paper bag and placed them by the garbage can so that housekeeping would know they were trash. The only thing they kept was the map of Osaka.

While she was doing that, the front desk called; she had a visitor. It was the woman Iku had just negotiated with on the phone. She seemed a little grumpy, probably thanks to Iku's inconvenient request.

"I'm sorry, Touma-sensei, I'll be right back! I'll knock when I get back, so look through the peep hole and make sure it's me before you open the door!"

Iku stuffed what looked like enough money into Doujou's wallet, grabbed the car key, and headed out of the room.

"Coming to pick up your cawr is kind of a schlep for me, you know," said the young woman from the rental car agency.

Iku bowed her head sincerely. "I'm sorry, I'm really sorry! Thank you for coming."

"Well, we get a lawt of customers from this hotel, so I guess we can afford to do them a favor once in a while."

Stinging from the surliness in the other woman's voice, Iku started to settle her account in the lobby.

"I was just checking out the cawr in the parking lot. The gas tank's almost full. You musta filled her up in Suita or sumthin'." Unlike the hotel staff, her Osaka accent<sup>18</sup> was thick enough to cut with a knife. She pulled a calculator out of her bag and started punching in numbers. "So, here, I'm not gonna charge you for the refueling. How's this for the pickup service?"

Iku was prepared for the woman to try and rip her off, but the number she offered was actually within the bounds of reason.

"Thank you, I'm really sorry to put you through all this trouble!" She paid the bill, handed over the key, and signed the receipt that the woman had brought. "The car's just over here," she said, heading for the parking lot.

The woman stopped her. "Didn't I just say I had seen the cawr? I know where it is, so if you've got better things to do, go do them." She

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<sup>18</sup> People in Osaka speak a slightly different dialect of Japanese than people in Tokyo; it's more melodic and verbs can be conjugated differently. I've chosen to render it in English as a New York City accent; I think it's a good cultural fit since both Osakans and New Yorkers are known for being a little brash!

waved a hand brusquely at Iku, perhaps to cover her embarrassment. Iku bowed her head deeply and ran back to the elevator.

They then had to wait impatiently for the nearby department stores to open.

"Alright, ten minutes till! If we check out now we'll be right on time! Let's go!"

Iku slung the shoulder bag over her body; Touma folded the map and shoved it in his pocket. She had already split their cash and given half of it to Touma.

They checked out and joined the throng of people on the sidewalk, heading for the department stores. They'd head for either Daimaru or Hanshin depending on which light was green at the crosswalk.

They ended up going to Hanshin. Entering the nearly-empty department store, they took the elevator up to the floor selling Western-style gentlemen's apparel.

It looked like a floor that targeted people in the prime of their life. Iku approached a friendly-looking saleswoman who fit right into that target demographic.

"Excuse me?"

"Yes, how may I help you?" she replied amiably.

Iku launched into the speech she had polished over and over in her mind. "I have an unusual request."

"Yes?"

"And money is no object." *Wow, that's something I never thought I would say!* She was so nervous she was in danger of stammering.

"...I see." The woman's eyes were wide as she nodded.

"And in return, you can't breathe a word of this to anyone."

"Yes, ma'am."

"I want you to take this man and make him the least conspicuous man in Osaka."

Behind Iku, Touma bowed in entreaty.

The woman looked at Touma. Her face lit up in sudden understanding.

"...So what you're saying is, you want me to make him unrecognizable?"

She had caught on fast. It probably meant that she was familiar with Touma's story.

The woman grinned.

"If that's what you want, honey," she said, "you're on the wrong floor. Follow me." She led the two of them to the elevator.

The woman took them down a few floors, then dragged them into a break room.

"Look sharp, dawlings! I've brought you a verrrry interesting customer!"

"Honey, whatcha doing on this floor?"

"Wait, isn't that...?"

"Don't worry your pretty little head about it! This little lady, she told me she wants us to make him 'the least conspicuous man in Osaka,' and that money is no object! Let's get down to it!"

The women had been in the middle of other work, but at this they all cried, "All right!" and started assigning duties. All Iku and Touma could do was watch nervously from the corner. *Where did all that excitement come from suddenly? Is this the fabled Osaka spirit?*

But when the women who had left the break room came back, the real torment started. Mostly for Touma.

"Voilà!"

When Iku saw what the women had conspired to do, she clapped both hands over her mouth. She was trying to keep herself from bursting into laughter. Laughing now would deeply wound the vulnerable Touma.

The first thing that dazzled her eyes was a sparkly purple sweater adorned with a rose made of rhinestones. Underneath was a bra, padded to create the illusion of breasts sagging with age. Under that was his bulletproof vest, so he looked much plumper than usual. His pants seemed to be a simple beige at first glance, but a line of leopard print ran up the sides. His shoes were a solid color, but they were bedecked with more rhinestones.

On his head was a curly, shoulder-length brown wig, and on his face was a matronly layer of makeup so marvelously thick that it hid even his stubble.

He sat stunned in front of a full-length mirror, unable to rise from his chair. On his lap was a black purse embellished with a beaded butterfly; presumably he would be carrying it. It too was encrusted with rhinestones, of course--the handle even had a fringe of Swarovski crystals.

"Isn't it a bit...gaudy?"

*Like that's that biggest issue!* she thought, but kept it to herself as she made a more polite objection.

"Trust me, honey, this is the *least* conspicuous getup in Osaka," a woman answered confidently. "Maybe it's even a little drab. But wherever you go in Osaka, you'll see a dozen women who look just like this. It's camouflage, dawling, camouflage."

True, Touma now looked like nothing more than an Osakan matron. His transformation was so flawless that he could probably use a women's bathroom without comment.

"When people get to be his age, men and women start to look more and more the same. Stubble turns white and doesn't show as much. We didn't even have to use theater makeup!"

"You can put the clothes you came with in that purse. Your shoes, too."

The women folded Touma's clothing with practiced hands and put it in the bag, along with the map.

"You could walk right by the Improvement troops and they wouldn't recognize you," someone said glibly. Iku and Touma bowed their heads in gratitude.

"You said money was no object, so we went ahead and added it all up for you. You wouldn't think so, but it takes a lot of money to look that cheap!"

"Bring it on!" Iku pulled out Doujou's wallet and waited.

"The sweater was 25,000 yen, the bra and padding were 35,000, the pants were 18,000 and the shoes were 20,000. The makeup was the most expensive--we used the best brands. If the gentleman doesn't need them again, you can keep them, honey." She continued to chatter as she listed out each item, ending with, "Your total is--168,250 yen!"

"All right!"

Iku had enough with her. She forked over 170,250 yen, and got 2,000 back in change.

"Here's your receipt. I rung it up already on one of the registers."

Iku took it gratefully and shoved it into Doujou's wallet, which was now bulging with various receipts.

Touma still looked like he was in shock, but managed to rise, clutching the purse.

"Thank you so much. Words aren't enough to express our gratitude."

They both bowed, and the supportive army of matrons smiled cheerily at them.

"The pleasure was ours--it's not every day we get to have so much fun. Be sure to visit us again!"

When they left the break room, Touma and Iku looked like nothing so much as mother and daughter, or possibly grandmother and granddaughter.

It was now after eleven o'clock. They exited Hanshin onto the second-story pedestrian bridge, then stopped.

Iku spoke first. "You'll be alright if we split up here?"

"Yes. I've done book tours here, so I'm a little familiar with the area. If I have a map, I should be fine."

"Okay. Then I'll see you at noon, like we planned."

Touma extended his hand.

"I'll be praying for the chance to shake your hand once more."

"Yes, sir."

Iku bit her lip, and gripped his outstretched hand tightly. Here at the end, there were so many things she wanted to say, she couldn't decide on one. When she looked at Touma, disguised as a plump old woman, she didn't feel like laughing at all now.

"It was an honor to serve as your escort."

In the end, that was all she could think of to say.

Because that's what Doujou would have wanted to say.

"I'm grateful to the both of you," Touma said, and gently released her hand. Then he walked across the wide bridge toward Osaka Station, disappearing into the throng. Iku climbed down from the bridge.

She looked back over her shoulder once. Just as the army of matrons had predicted, Touma blended almost too well into the crowd, fading into the scenery so well that she could only recognize him by the purple sweater he wore.

Surely he would be all right. Surely this would work. They had been aided by so many people. The Library Force had striven so hard. If it didn't work, all that would be for naught.

Once she had left the bridge, she walked a while until she found a bookstore, where she bought a pocket map of the Osaka metro area. The one given to them by the shop owner in Shinjuku had gone to Touma, but Iku needed one too.



She had been walking in the right direction, as it turned out. But it was almost an hour until they had agreed to meet, and with Iku's legs, it would only take her twenty minutes to get there. She thought about buying a handy book and taking it to a coffee shop, but she would never forgive herself if she became engrossed in the book and lost track of time.

She should use the extra time for reconnaissance, she decided, and turned her feet toward her destination.

After Touma parted ways from Iku, he headed for the Umeda subway station and the Midousuji Line.

None of the people who passed Touma recognized him. He had mixed feelings about the fact that he was so well disguised as an Osakan matron, but he supposed it was better than the alternative. -- Though he couldn't help but be unnerved to see large, pendulous breasts every time he looked down.

*It's nothing compared to what she's been through for my sake,* he chided himself.

He bought his subway ticket--a day pass, just in case. He went through the ticket gate and went down to the platform where the train to Tennouji--the southbound train--would arrive.

Even when the train slid into the station and Touma boarded, he was just another of the female passengers. The army of matrons were a force to be reckoned with.

He got off after a five-minute ride at Honmachi, two stops away from Umeda. The next stop was Shinsaibashi. Touma's destination lay on Midousuji Boulevard halfway between Honmachi and Shinsaibashi. According to the map, it was about a half-kilometer walk.

What with one thing and another, by the time he got back aboveground at Honmachi Station, there was only a half-hour left until noon. *I had better hurry,* he thought, and started walking down Midousuji Boulevard. Touma's destination was across the street from the Nanba Shrine, on the 19th floor of the building on the south corner of the block.

It was the British consulate-general.

As he approached the building, he saw one of the vans that he had learned to recognize, parked on the side of the road. He saw the uniforms of the Improvement Special Agency here and there, but none of them gave him a second look.

He walked boldly and briskly, looking only in the direction he was heading. *Osakans walk fast, dawling*, had been the last piece of advice the army of matrons had given him, and he tried to follow it.

He had seen on the map that there was a wholesale bazaar behind the building, so he had planned to approach from that side first, but he had gained confidence in his apparent invisibility. He daringly crossed right in front of the building and from there went back toward the bazaar. The Improvement troops ignored him completely.

It turned out that cross-dressing was extremely effective camouflage. He walked through the bazaar, buying a pastry and drink at a convenience store, and exited on the opposite end. Still no one gave him a second glance. He crossed the street and entered Nanba shrine. After paying his respects, he took up a position on a convenient bench, taking his pastry out of its bag and nibbling. The bench was in front of a pond toward the back of the grounds, and the shrine was enclosed behind a high wall, only a sliver of Midousuji Boulevard visible through the gate. There was no sign of surveillance within the shrine.

At last, it was noon.

Suddenly, Midousuji Boulevard exploded with activity. He walked over and placed himself casually in the shadow of a fine camphor tree next to the gate, and peered out from his hiding spot. The scattered Improvement troops had regrouped and boarded their van, which ignored the light and took a screaming illegal right turn onto the street south of the shrine. Midousuji Boulevard was a one-way street heading south; no U-turns were possible. They would probably turn onto Yotsubashisen Boulevard, a one-way street heading north. A sea of cars suddenly put on their brakes and honked their disapproval.

Touma waited for the noise to die down, then stood. He left the shrine and headed for the crosswalk--and that was when it happened.

A hand descended onto Touma's shoulder.

\*

Iku followed the map and headed south, finally reaching a three-way intersection. It was the place where Midousuji Boulevard and New Midousuji Boulevard met up.

She could see the American consulate-general on New Midousuji Boulevard, connected to the American Building which took up an entire city block. There was a police presence, just like at the embassy. However, there were also a number of men who looked even more

dangerous than the police. They were disguised in suits, but she could tell right away that they were Improvement troops. Somewhere nearby was probably one of those familiar vans.

The Improvement Special Agency had set up a wide net around the American consulate-general, for out of Touma's list of countries he might seek asylum in, it was the closest to Osaka Station.

"Good thing we saw this coming..."

America was also the only country on Touma's list that owned the building that housed its consulate-general. The other countries had their consulates-general in multi-use buildings of one kind or another. Since the American consulate-general would be the easiest building for Touma to leave after he had claimed asylum, the Improvement Special Agency had figured that it would be at the top of Touma's list. Touma and Iku had outsmarted them, however, and decided to try once more for Britain, having been thwarted at the British embassy in Tokyo. Even if the British consulate-general was under surveillance, it was only two kilometers from the American consulate-general, according to the map. If she caused a commotion at the American consulate-general, the surveillance team would rush over to back up their comrades.

"...But maybe I shouldn't cross here."

Iku could almost look across the two streets and see her objective, the American consulate-general. Between them, the three-way intersection made a triangular block, containing tall buildings and a police box. There were crosswalks leading to this block across both Midousuji Boulevard and New Midousuji Boulevard, but if she crossed now, she would be under surveillance by the Improvement troops. Even at this distance, Iku could tell that they were observing the pedestrians carefully.

Not to mention that Iku would be crossing from Midousuji Boulevard, coming from the north. It was the direction the Improvement troops were watching most closely.

There were still more than thirty minutes until noon. Iku casually turned right and kept walking, putting the American consulate-general at her back. She might have drawn suspicion if she had turned around and headed back north the way she had come.

She entered a side street, hurriedly unfolded her map, and carefully traced a route back to the last intersection she had crossed. From there she crossed Midousuji Boulevard to the triangular block,

then circled around to the back of the American Building. By the time she made it, it was 11:50.

In the shadow of the building, she counted down the minutes until noon.

At last there was only one minute to go--then thirty seconds.

Iku exploded into action, sprinting across the crosswalk directly in front of the American consulate-general. She stopped in the open plaza at the end of the triangular block, between Midousuji Boulevard and New Midousuji Boulevard. Heads instinctively turned at her sudden movement, all belonging to the Improvement troops. There must have been fifteen or sixteen in front of the consulate-general alone.

*Draw their attention away from everything except you.*

*And then proclaim--*

"This is the Kantou Library Force! We're right here, you bastards!!"

Iku reached into her shoulder bag, drew out the submachine gun, and pointed it toward the sky.

She put her finger to the trigger, and pulled until it was out of bullets.

The Improvement troops, with trained reflexes, all immediately took cover.

It gave her a second to reload. Without looking, Iku swapped in one of the spare magazines she had thrust into the pockets of her jeans. She sent another burst skyward. Some of the Improvement troops made to emerge from their hiding places; she aimed her gun down at the asphalt and swept it from side to side. They took cover once more.

Pedestrians in the area had long since fled from the sudden gunfire, and drivers must have noticed the disturbance and detoured to avoid it, for the street was deserted. In any case, she had accepted from the beginning that she would be disrupting traffic and disturbing the peace. And she accepted the consequences.

*One more left!* Iku reloaded with her last magazine.

Touma jerked around.

"Touma-sensei?"

A smiling young man was holding up his Library Force badge.

Touma breathed a sigh of relief.

"Welcome to Osaka. I'm with the Kansai Library Force. Thanks to your, um, drastic disguise, it took us a while to find you. We even got here before the Improvement troops."

"Ah, well, this was..." Touma grew flustered.

The man put an arm around his shoulders, guiding him across the crosswalk the instant the light changed. "First things first. Let's get you into the consulate-general. ...Though your appearance might take a little explaining. What a remarkably clever tactic, though."

He led Touma into the building, and just like that, they were in an elevator on the way to the 19th floor.

"What about Kasahara-san?"

"We'll get a report on her status once we're inside the consulate-general. They'll call my cell phone."

Thus did Touma at last achieve asylum.

\*

Iku had exhausted her last magazine. She thrust the submachine gun back in her bag, and tried to pull out the SIG-P220, but she couldn't find it fast enough. The Improvement troops had already risen from their hiding places.

*Shit. I wanted to use up all my ammunition.* Competitive even at times like this, Iku narrowed her eyes. It looked as though she would get her first chance to test the effectiveness of her bulletproof vest.

But--

The Improvement troops, who were always eager to brandish their guns, made no move to draw them. Instead, they sprinted toward Iku, who stared at them in puzzlement.

*Why aren't they shooting?* She was so taken aback by the impossibility of the situation that she forgot to run. As she stood frozen in shock, a van came barreling down the street and interposed itself between Iku and the Improvement troops, by which she deduced that it did not belong to the Improvement Special Agency. The door slid open and someone called her name.

"You're Chief Librarian Kasahara, right? Hurry!"

Her body reacted instinctively. She dove headfirst into the van. It was moving before she could close the door, tires squealing. The van headed north on New Midousuji Boulevard.

"We're with the Kansai Library Force. The Kantou Library Force asked us to take over the backup duties for you and Touma-sensei."

"...What happened to Touma-sensei!?"

"He made it safely into the British consulate-general."

Iku's knees went weak, and she collapsed bonelessly onto one of the seats.

"...I don't understand why they didn't shoot me."

"Supervisor Genda of the Kantou Library Base's Library Task Force gave us the orders: we were to reach out to the Self-Defense Forces. They told the Improvement Special Agency that some of the ammunition given to the Kansai branch had a chance of exploding, and they recalled all of it--all the magazines for their sub-machine guns and handguns. Apparently the Self-Defense Forces were only too happy to help us; they've consistently opposed the administration's hard-line policy regarding the terrorist attack on the reactor. That meant that just for today, the Kansai branch of the Improvement Special Agency didn't have a single bullet to their name. They couldn't have used their guns even if they wanted to. That's why they tried to rush you instead.

"The police have also been critical of the way the administration has handled the terrorist attack, so they'll claim that they were 'delayed' on their way to detain you for discharging a firearm, and let the matter go. They also helped with traffic control."

More to herself than in reply to the trooper's explanation, she murmured, "Ah, that must mean..."

Genda had understood the message in her telegram. Iku sunk deeper into her seat. The trooper next to her offered a cell phone.

"Here. You must want to make your own report."

"Thank you," she whispered, and dialed the Kantou Library Base's number.

She reached the administration office first, and they transferred her to the Library Task Force.

When she heard Genda's gruff voice answer, Iku reported in.

"This is Kasahara. Mission accomplished. Thank you for your support."

"Helluva job you did! That telegram idea was brilliant in its own way--but I could have done without that damned chirrupy music! I've never heard anything so irritating in my life!"

"I tried my best! I didn't know who had leaked the information, and my cell phone was broken! So I tried to make it look like Shibasaki's niece or someone had sent her a birthday telegram!"

*Happy birthday, Auntie Asako! Right now me and Daddy are driving through Gifu on vacation. We're getting to Osaka tonight and staying in a hotel. Tomorrow I'm gonna go shopping in Kitaku. Daddy's gonna go visit an office on Midousuji Boulevard where a friend of his works.*

That was what Iku's telegram had said.

Kitaku meant the American consulate-general, the office on Midousuji Boulevard meant the British consulate-general, and she had tried to hint that she would be at the American consulate-general as a decoy. Believing absolutely that Genda--that her friends--would back her up.

And her friends had proven themselves worthy of that absolute faith.

The question she most wanted to ask was also the one she was most afraid to ask. Blessedly, Genda broached the subject first.

"Doujou is safe," he said. "He almost came down with pneumonia, but he seems to be out of the woods. They said all he needs is rest now--not that it matters, since until that leg of his heals he won't be able to do anything *but* rest. He'll be fine if he stays quiet for a while, and doesn't do anything stupid."

"Commander, that's, uh... I just think you're the last person Instructor Doujou would want to hear that advice from!"

Iku laughed and laughed, until her laughter turned into sobs. The others in the car pretended not to notice. Someone wordlessly handed her a handkerchief; she gratefully wiped her eyes.

"Until things are more settled, the Kansai Library Force will take over Touma-sensei's protection duty. I want you to come home as fast as you can. In fact, I asked the troops out there to take you to the Shin-Osaka train station as soon as they picked you up. In recognition of your services, I'll even let you ride first class!"

Genda, having said all he wanted to say, hung up on her.

"Thank you," she said, passing the phone back. She scrubbed at her eyes with the handkerchief.

*I wanna go home. Right now.*

"Excuse me, about how long does the bullet train from Osaka to Tokyo take?"

The trooper next to her replied, "If it's the Nozomi, a little under two and a half hours."

Two and a half hours suddenly felt like an unbearably long time.

More precisely, being two and half hours away from Doujou was unbearable.

\*

But even after she had borne those two and half hours, she still didn't get to see Doujou that day. Nor the next day. Nor the one after that.

As the person who had been escorting Touma up to the end, she couldn't escape her debriefings and other attendant duties.

Touma's flight to the British consulate-general was widely covered on the news. He made a statement, saying that it was preferable to seek asylum rather than to have his freedom of speech restricted, even for a fixed amount of time, as a result of terrorism. International support and commentary from other countries poured in.

The criticism from America and England, two countries which were occasionally the target of random acts of terror, was especially fierce. If a country wavers in its principles due to terrorist activity, they said, it legitimizes terrorism as an effective tool, which benefits every other terrorist in the world.

*For countries dealing with terrorism, it's been long accepted as common sense that yielding to the terrorists and bending one's own laws in order to place restrictions on citizens and society is the poorest of poor policies.*

*The author who sought asylum in this case, Touma Kurato, is an expert in international plots, and has even given lectures at various Japanese law enforcement agencies.*

*As friends of Japan, we strongly desire that Japan stand firm in the face of terror, and prevent the kind of topsy-turvy situation that lead to one of Japan's leading authors fleeing one democratic country to seek asylum in another.*

*In America, there were also rumors that a conspiracy thriller that had been published a few years previous had inspired a large-scale terrorist attack<sup>19</sup>, but they were just rumors and they were treated as such. We would like to prevent you from making the rash and foolish move of basing an entire country's counter-terrorism policy on rumors.*

---

<sup>19</sup> These rumors exist about Tom Clancy's books and the September 11th attacks. The Oklahoma City bombing was also inspired by scenes from a novel.



*If you do not accede to this proposal, we will have to reconsider whether or not to treat Japan as a friend of democracy.*

America and England were the driving forces behind this condemnation, and many democratic countries signed it.

The Touma Kurato issue was no longer just Japan's problem. And the Media Improvement Committee's power extended only within the borders of Japan.

Tedzuka Satoshi played his part as commentator every day on the roaming report, explaining the situation in detail. He used incidents the Library Force's history to reveal to the citizenry the dark side of the Media Improvement Act.

At last, the administration repealed the newest enforcement order of the Improvement Act--the one that allowed the Improvement Committee to temporarily detain authors and other thinkers. The repeal announcement was broadcast not just within Japan, but throughout the world.

Of course, the stupidity of passing that enforcement order in the first place was still being criticized around the globe; that was another story.

As Touma was exalted throughout the world, he took the British consulate-general up on their offer of asylum. England was especially pleased, though there was some trouble over how a refugee from another democratic country should be handled--should he be processed as an immigrant and considered a refugee?

The situation grew complicated, but it was only a week before it was largely settled.

\*

The roaming report concluded its run by reporting Touma's return to Tokyo.

Thanks to Touma's case, the Media Improvement Act had lost an enforcement order that it had taken for granted--but only one. It didn't change the fact that the media was still under the Improvement Act's constant scrutiny--and that went double for mass media like television. The unusual strategy of the roaming report had reached its limit.

Orikuchi and the others would probably continue to do guerrilla-style reporting on the Improvement Act in weekly magazines.

"It's like we're right back where we started."

In her room, Iku was watching the conclusion of the roaming report as she fiddled with her new cell phone. It was from the same company as her old phone, so she still had her contacts list, but she hadn't been able to restore her data, and had to re-enter it all. Shibasaki had a backup of work-related data on her personal laptop, so Iku had been able to pull some of it from there, but she had been working on recreating her address book whenever she had a spare moment. She also had to go to the Logistical Support Division and have her new phone customized with anti-wiretapping codes.

"Not exactly where we started," Shibasaki replied, watching Tedzuka Satoshi during what would probably be his last television appearance for the time being. "We were able to fight off an attempt to breach the bulwarks of free speech. It's a huge accomplishment. We even got the attention of the rest of the world. Also," Shibasaki continued, "there's the supporting opinion from Touma-sensei's Supreme Court case. It'll be one of the things that leads to a reconsideration of the Improvement Act, in the future."

"Whoa, really?"

"It's the strongest criticism of the Improvement Act to date. This will be the fulcrum that allows the Library of Tomorrow Project and Tedzuka Satoshi to recruit more people who oppose the Improvement Act, and carry out their secret war."

"You're talking about it like we won't have anything to do with it."

"We won't. Even though we joined forces during Touma-sensei's case, the Library of Tomorrow Project was only invited to join the other groups that oppose the Improvement Act because they said they had cut ties with the Library Force and were now free agents. I think that rather than being a Library Force organization, the Library of Tomorrow Project will turn into a neutral organization that links the Department of Justice and the Library Force. It will still have roots in the Library Force where it started, but I think little by little those roots will move to the Department of Justice. The anti-Improvement Act activists in the Justice Department probably want a group doing research on the Act within the department, anyway."

Iku couldn't help scowling at Shibasaki's explanation.

"Wait, but then what's to keep the Library of Tomorrow Project from getting filled with people who support the Improvement Act?"

"Tedsuka Satoshi wants his name to be remembered, and I think he'd firmly oppose it being remembered for such a pathetic act. It's just not his style. Anyway, he's trained his followers. There will always

be people who came from Library Force in the Library of Tomorrow Project, just in case."

It reminded Iku of something she was told after she returned to the base.

"It's...it's a pity about Acting Director Hatano."

"It is a pity but it's mostly just pitiful," Shibasaki said dismissively. As usual, Shibasaki had digested and gotten past the betrayal quickly. "Tedzuka Satoshi is a different caliber. I think I can believe that much. Anyway, I don't think he misreads the way the winds are blowing. After people heard what other countries think of us, the Improvement Act's long-term prognosis got worse. It'll mean cutting down on the Library Force at the same time, but if the Improvement Act is repealed, we won't need the Library Force anymore."

"Aw, the Library Force is going to go away someday?" Iku laid her head on the table, crestfallen.

Shibasaki smiled wryly. "Not anytime soon. Both sides cutting back gradually one at a time, pushing and pulling...it'll take twenty years, won't it? But during this case we managed to gain a political toehold that will let us fight and yet not surrender our opposition to censorship, and that's a pretty big deal. The Library Force will want to be completely demilitarized by the time censorship is repealed. If we can cut back on the Library Force without cutting back on the budget, we can divert our defense funds to the library facilities budget. And by that time, you might even be a decent librarian."

As the news program took a commercial break, Iku asked teasingly, "By the way, why did you exchange cell phones with Tedzuka?"

"Because Tedzuka's phone number made the best bait for getting a hold of Satoshi," she answered glibly. "Those two have a weird obsessive thing with each other."

After a moment, her eyes flashed.

"So I lend Tedzuka my cell phone, and what does he do? He comes back from the Supreme Court the day of the ruling and it's broken! The data's completely fucked. He better make it up to me, y'know? My phone was an arsenal of contacts from every office and every department!"

Iku had almost never seen Shibasaki so angry, though it wasn't surprising given how much of a data packrat she was.

"S-So what's Tedzuka's punishment gonna be...?"

"He has to reimburse me for my new phone, and enter the information for a hundred of my Library Force contacts."

"You're evil! You have that all backed up!"

"I'm only making him do my Library Force contacts," Shibasaki said nonchalantly, sipping her tea. "Counting the nonessential ones, my contacts list is over three hundred people long. And, since it's Tedzuka, he'll probably go buy backup software and use it to copy over the overlapping contacts from his own phone. As punishments go, it's a light one."

*Wow. For a man she's not dating, she certainly has him whipped.* Iku watched Shibasaki's profile, her head cocked.

Shibasaki looked pretty cheerful about the diabolical punishment she was plotting.

"Speaking of punishment, it's great that you're getting away with just having to issue an apology for discharging your weapon in front of the American consulate-general."

"Holy shit, how did you know that!?"

Iku was once more unnerved and impressed by Shibasaki's information-gathering skills. Iku had only learned of the verdict herself earlier that day at work. The Library Force had permission to fire that weapon near Library Force facilities, and they had created a loophole by transferring that permission to the Kansai Library Force. For appearance's sake, the local police had to at least demand an apology from Iku for disturbing traffic.

"That reminds me, you haven't been to the hospital to see Instructor Doujou yet?"

Iku's entire body tensed at Shibasaki's casual question.

"He can have visitors now, you know."

"Y-Yeah...I've just been so busy since I got back."

"But what about tomorrow? It's a holiday."

"Yeah, I know..."

"You know, I'm surprised at you. I expected you would force them to give you time off and rush over there as soon as you got back."

Since it was summer, there was no kotatsu blanket to hide under. Instead, Iku looked down, avoiding Shibasaki's gaze.

After she had finished her mission at the consulate-general, the thought of being two and half hours away from Doujou had been unbearable.

But after she had returned and been driven back into her duties, she had had too much time to think about the reckless things she had done at their parting.

*What kind of woman steals a kiss from the man she loves when he's incapacitated with a serious injury!?*

*And I told him that when I got back, I would tell him I loved him? So I basically already told him!*

And she had done all these things in front of everyone. It had surely made Doujou uncomfortable and annoyed.

"It sounds like his mood is getting worse every day. Maybe you should go and see him soon?"

*Ugh, it's getting harder and harder to go!* But she had to at least return his rank insignia and wallet already.

"Tomorrow. I'll go tomorrow."

She had also better go and deliver her thanks to the bookstore in Shinjuku that had helped them. The additional reason to go gave her momentum.

"Oh? Then give him my regards," Shibasaki said. "Oh, and everyone else brought him flowers and he's got plenty, so you might want to bring something else as your get-well-soon gift," Shibasaki informed her casually.

\*

The next day dawned so fair, it was hard to believe there had been a typhoon the week before.

Iku rode the Chuuou Line to Shinjuku and stopped in at the bookstore. She wanted to run the errand that had the lower psychological barrier first. *It's understandable*, she thought defensively. *Oh yeah? Who do you want to understand it? ...Someone, I guess.*

For a thank-you gift, she went the safe route with a box of pastries, and had the manager called over so she could deliver it.

"Thank you so much for the clothes and supplies; they were a lifesaver. And thank you so much for taking care of my boss. We're all deeply in your debt. Please accept our gratitude."

Iku bowed deeply and handed over the box of sweets.

"Don't mention it. It was an honor for us to be able to help Touma-sensei. We too understand the desire to protect books to the fullest extent of the law."

The manager's reply made Iku realize once more how important it was that they had a legal way to protect books. Now was no time to bemoan the eventual demise of the Library Force. That bright future was still a long way off.

Until then, the Library Force had to continue fighting to protect books.

"Touma-sensei called us too, the other day. It sounds like the reporters are so aggressive that he can barely leave his house."

"How is he!? I haven't talked to him since we split up in Osaka."

"He sounded fine, as far as I could tell over the phone."

Bolstered by that piece of good news, Iku left the bookstore.

Next up was the more distressing errand.

She got a little lost on the way to the hospital, but she arrived quickly. She hesitated a little before going in the door, and then hesitated again before inquiring at the front desk.

She hesitated before getting on the elevator she would have to take to get to his room, and continued to wallow in hesitation until-- she reached the door of his room.

*Doujou Atsushi.*

She must have spent five minutes frozen before that door. At length, she steeled herself and finally knocked.

"Come in."

When she heard his voice, she thought her heart would burst.

She softly pushed the door open and peeked inside. Doujou was sitting up, his right leg in a cast and suspended over the bed. He frowned the moment he saw her. He had a private room, probably due to the nature of his injuries; the fact that he didn't have to care what a roommate would think was probably why he greeted her with a bellow of:

"You're late!"

"I'm sorry, sir!" Iku said, standing up straight. She hastily entered the room and closed the door.

Taking up a position exactly one meter from his bedside, Iku snapped to attention.

"Library Chief Kasahara, reporting in after successfully completing my mission...a week ago..." Iku hung her head.

"Sit," Doujou told her, scowling. He probably meant in the chair next to his bed. Iku hesitated. "Sit!" he ordered in a firm voice. Iku practically collapsed onto the stool.

"Um, this is for you," she said, proffering a box of cheesecake. When they had gone out to drink chamomile tea together, he had ordered a slice, saying that he liked cheesecake if it wasn't too rich. This one was from a different shop, but it had a good reputation, so the cake was probably tasty.

"Put it in the fridge for now."

*Come on, why couldn't you have said you wanted to have some now? Between putting on tea and eating cake, I could have had time to pull myself together!* Iku silently objected, but of course there was no way she could say it out loud.

She put the box in the fridge as instructed, and then turned back to Doujou.

"Well, before I came here, I stopped by the bookshop in Shinjuku where they helped us."

"...That was awfully thoughtful, for you."

That "for you" was a little uncalled for.

"I guess they also got a call from Touma-sensei, and he seems to be doing well."

"Oh? That's good."

The words were glad enough, but he still hadn't stopped frowning.

This was finally too much for Iku, who was already suffering from a guilty conscience.

"I'm sorry, sir! If you want to scold me, please just get it over with!" She jerked her head down in a bow.

"I told you," Doujou bellowed again, "that you were late!"

"Well, um, you see, I had so much to..."

"Look! Thanks to this leg I'm stuck here! I couldn't congratulate you until you came!" Doujou ruffled her hair, and his voice went soft and low. "Well done. I saw the whole thing on the news, and Komaki and the others gave me the details. You were alone, and out of contact with the rest of the Force, and still managed to succeed. Well done."

Overcome with surprise at his praise, Iku's tears were spilling over her eyelids before she could hold them back.

"If you're going to congratulate me, can you please not scowl while you're doing it?" she asked, sniffing.

Doujou looked away from her, uncomfortable. "I wanted to congratulate you as soon as possible, but you came so late," he said, still stroking her head gently. He apparently realized that his anger had been irrational.

*Dammit, I dressed up today and everything, and now my makeup's gonna run.*

Before she could pull out the handkerchief in her purse, Doujou offered her the tissue box.

"I think these will work better for you."

*Yes, rather,* she thought waspishly, yanking several tissues out of the box.

She dabbed the tears away from her eyes and cheeks, blew her nose hard, and threw the tissue away. Then she took another one and pressed it to the corners of her eyes, forcing the tears to stop.

While Iku wept, Doujou kept stroking her head. After a while, she became embarrassed, and remembered her remaining errand.

"Instructor, here..." She reached into her bag and pulled out Doujou's rank insignia and wallet. "Thank you for letting me borrow them."

Doujou took both, putting his wallet on the bedside table. He toyed with the rank insignia, one hand still stroking Iku's head. "Did it come in handy?"

"Yes, sir. Adding two *camomille* as a mere Library Chief felt a little like cheating, though."

Suddenly, Doujou's hand left her head.

"You promised that when you returned this, you'd say something to me. I kept up my end of the bargain."

*You better promise to get better!* Doujou had indeed kept his promise, but... Iku's face was bright red.

*H-He's bringing that up right now!?*

"I...I've as good as said it, haven't I...?"

"I kept up *my* end of the bargain," Doujou repeated simply.

"Well, I'll just return this to you after you're discharged from the hospital! You still haven't fully recovered, after all!" she said glibly, trying to snatch the insignia from Doujou's hands. But Doujou swiftly raised his hand and dodged Iku's surprise attack. He hid his hand on the far side of his body; there was no way she could pry it away now.

"I-If I say it, what will you say?"

"I won't know until I hear what you have to say."

She knew he was teasing her at this point, but she couldn't switch herself into that mode.

Iku took a few deep breaths. Her whole body was straining with tension. She tried several times to speak, but stopped each time because she knew her voice would shake.



"I love you."

She blurted the words as if they were escaping from her mouth. And then the dam broke.

"I don't care anymore that you were the prince I met in high school. I love the person you are now."

Doujou, who had been sitting up, fell forward onto his face. In a few moments he lifted his head and looked at Iku.

"...Wait. Where did you hear about that prince stuff?"

"From Tedzuka Satoshi. It was in a letter that he sent along with your money."

Doujou's head slumped. Iku could hear him mutter, "That bastard."

"That's why I did stuff like that leg-sweeping throw back then...I'm sorry."

"No, forget about it."

"I can't!" Iku insisted. "Before I knew that you were the Library Officer from back then, I said so many horrible things to you, and snapped at you and defied you and--"

"I said forget about it!"

"No, listen to me! Now I admire the person you are now! I love the person you've become, eight years after I first saw you. Is it too late to tell you that?"

"Forget it! No more! Shut up! Be quiet!"

"You were the one who told me to say it!" she wailed, and then she realized.

*Forget it. No more. Shut up. Be quiet.*

*Oh. She swallowed her tears. It is too late.*

"...I understand. I'm sorry. I won't say any more."

Iku started to rise, but Doujou hastily seized her hand.

"Wait! You *don't* understand. You definitely don't understand!"

"But..."

"Just sit! Don't make an injured man overexert himself!"

When he invoked his injuries, she had no choice but to obey. Timidly, Iku lowered herself back into her chair.

"When I told you to be quiet, I meant about that prince stuff..." Doujou cast his eyes up to the ceiling as if seeking his next words there. "To hell with it," he suddenly muttered recklessly.

Then he turned back to Iku.

"I might give you my cold; do you mind?"

Before Iku could answer, Doujou put his arms around her and brought his mouth down on hers.

For a moment, Iku's eyes widened. Her body went rigid. It took her a long moment to even understand what was happening. When she did at last, her body melted against Doujou's chest.

It was a completely different kiss from the one that Iku had stolen.

At length, Doujou pulled his mouth away. He drew back from Iku a little and looked into her eyes.

"Now do you understand?"

Iku nodded vigorously. "I understand that I wasn't too late."

Doujou hung his head. "Is that all?"

"No!" Iku added hastily. "I understand a lot of other things too."

"Good." Doujou leaned back on the bed. "Now let me have some of that cake you brought. And I want tea too; black, if you please."

He had never presumed upon her like this before, and she understood that that kiss had moved some private boundary line between them. A grin broke out on Iku's face.

There was an electric kettle on top of the refrigerator. Its light was on, so she knew there was hot water, but she didn't know what to do about the rest.

"Is there black tea?"

"Komaki brought teabags; they're in the drawer there."

She opened the drawer of the small desk and found the teabags, along with two teacups and two plastic cups. There were also a set of plastic forks and plates.

"Wow, you have everything!"

"Komaki brought it all for me when he came to visit. Everyone was bringing me cakes and things, and no one was thinking to bring utensils. Until Komaki visited I was eating them all with my hands."

Iku's shoulder's slumped; she too had forgotten to bring utensils. "Just learn from his example," Doujou teased her gently.

She made tea and plated the cake, and while they ate together she told him the story of her escape with Touma. When she got to the part about Touma disguising himself as a woman, Doujou laughed until he couldn't breathe.

"That's incredible. D'you think that's what they mean when they talk about the Osaka spirit?"

"I think we just happened to meet a particularly spirited saleswoman, and she got carried away. If my phone hadn't died, I

would have taken pictures. Touma-sensei was a perfect Osaka matron."

After they had finished their cake, they chatted for a while, until the hospital's early dinner hour rolled around.

"I'll go wash the plates."

"Thanks. There's a washroom right outside my room."

She left the room, quickly washed the dishes, and returned.

"You don't have a dish towel, so I'll leave them on top of the refrigerator until they dry. I'll put a tissue over them. And next time I come, I'll bring you a dish towel."

"Don't worry about it, in a few days I'll be moving to a hospital close to the base anyway..."

Doujou trailed off and squeezed Iku's hand lightly.

"After I move, be sure to visit a little more regularly."

"Yes, sir. ...I'm sorry, to tell you the truth, I didn't come until today because I was scared to tell you I loved you," she confessed.

"Yes, I knew that," Doujou said, patting her head.

Before she went home, they shared one last kiss, and then Iku left Doujou's hospital room.

## Epilogue

\*

The season for weeding out new recruits had rolled around again. When the noon bell sounded, the recruits, exhausted by their morning training, dragged themselves toward the direction of the mess hall. One could always tell the librarian recruits and the Defense Force recruits apart at lunch by their level of exhaustion.

One Defense Force recruit, a young man, was chattering animatedly as he ate.

"Dammit, if I only had gotten into the Library Force a year ago. We would've still been able to legally fire guns, y'know!" He brought up the hand that wasn't holding his chopsticks, pretended it was a gun, and mimed firing it.

His friends all went tense, their attention on something behind him. They gave him frantic looks to try to get him to stop talking, but the blabbering recruit didn't notice.

"Missed it by just one damn year! I wanted my chance to shoot a SIG-P220!"

"What the hell kind of idiot are you!?"

A merciless fist descended on the recruit's head.

"Ow!" The recruit dropped his chopsticks and reflexively cradled his head. Turning around, he cried out in terror, "Instructor Doujou!"

"Do you have any idea just how much pain and trouble there was before firearms were prohibited in the battle over censorship!?"

"I-I'm sorry!"

"First thing this afternoon, you're going to give me 200 push-ups!"

"Yes, sir!"

The recruit stood, saluted, and watched his instructor leave. Then he collapsed crestfallen into his chair.

"Why didn't you guys tell me!?"

"We were all giving you looks! It's not our fault you didn't notice!"

"Instructor Doujou was right, anyway."

The chatterbox recruit glumly resumed his lunch, without any of his previous garrulity.

"So you're 'Instructor Doujou' to them, huh?" Next to her, Tedzuka was grinning.

Iku shot him a glare. "What? You have a problem with that?"

"No, I was just thinking that when we first enlisted, I never even dreamed that you and I would end up as instructors together. Or that you would become Doujou Iku, feared by all."

"Are you saying Officer First Class Doujou has bad taste? I'll knock you on your ass right now if you are."

"Are you psychic?"

"Okay, that's it. After work today, we're going to the dojo and settling this with a match. Now that that's decided, hurry up and find us some seats."

"You always want to settle things with a match."

They found seats in the corner of the mess hall and sat down across from each other.

"You're the one who needs to settle things, with Shibasaki. Are you two together or not?"

"How the hell should I know?" Tedzuka scowled. "Ask Shibasaki if you want to know something like that. I've never had any say in the matter."

"None at all?"

"Well, not *none*..."

"So what if you squared your shoulders and gave her a little push? She might give way surprisingly easily."

The suggestion was the result of years of observing Shibasaki as a close friend. Iku gauged that the future of their relationship depended on some decisive action from Tedzuka (since Shibasaki wasn't the type to go out and chase a man down herself), but Tedzuka was the most hopeless man in the world when it came to matters of romance. This was, after all, the man who had suddenly asked to be in a relationship with Iku, despite having no interest in her as a woman, after the mere hint from his superiors that he should get to know her better.

"From the outside, your relationship seems so sticky sweet, yet for some reason you won't stay stuck together."

"Wait, *you're* saying that to me? *You?! I don't want to hear something like that from you, or your husband either!*"

"I hear that Officer First Class Komaki and Marié-chan are getting married once she graduates from college. If a good wave like that is coming by, why not try to ride it? If you don't hurry up, you're gonna

end up like Commander Genda and Orikuchi-san. You wanna wait until you're both over sixty to figure out how the other really feels? And unlike them, you've never been lovers. Oh, what a fragile bond you two have!"

"Leaving that aside," said Tedzuka, noticing that he had been backed into a corner and changing the subject, "how's your group?"

"Oh, that boy from earlier is the biggest problem child. Everybody loves him, but he's just so reckless and imprudent."

"Yeah, what he said before was completely imprudent. He sounded just like a little boy who wants to play with guns."

"Go play with guns in Guam and get it out of your system, idiot."

Three years after Touma Kurato's asylum-seeking, the anti-Improvement Act faction, led by the Library of Tomorrow Project, passed a law prohibiting the use of firearms in the battle over censorship. Enforcement orders and by-laws allowing the use of guns had been eliminated from the Media Improvement Act and the Law of Library Freedom.

It was the very first step toward abolishing censorship.

"I have an interesting one in my group. She's a woman in the Defense Force, so she says you're the officer she looks up to. If Officer First Class Doujou was a prince, maybe now Officer Third Class Doujou is a princess?"

"Stooooop!" Iku clapped her hands over her ears.

Remembering that she had once rhapsodized over her prince without knowing that he was Doujou Atsushi, the man who was now her husband, made her want to hide in a box of embarrassment.

"Oh, I can't believe how much shame I brought on Atsushi-san. I need to do penance."

"...Even if you do penance now, I don't think you'll be able to compensate for all the shame Officer Doujou endured back then."

"Shut up, I don't want to hear it from a man who can't hurry up and get the woman he loves to go to bed with him."

"Wha...!" Tedzuka turned bright red before her eyes. "Wh-Who told..."

"Just so you know," Iku said, "you two are completely obvious. Especially you."

"Shut up!" Tedzuka bellowed, and attacked his lunch with gusto.

After they married, they had moved in to family housing on the base.

Returning to the Library Task Force office after her duties were over, she checked the official status board. Doujou's column said, "At home." It hadn't said "At dorm" in a year. Iku smiled to herself.

Since they both worked, the first one to arrive home usually made dinner. When she reached their apartment, she could already see lights on through the window. The sun had completely set, so she could see inside quite clearly. *I should close the curtains when I get in*, she thought to herself, climbing up to the second floor of the four-story building.

"I'm home," she said as she unlocked the door and entered.

"Welcome back," a voice called from the kitchen. There were the smells and sounds of cooking, and Atsushi was standing at the sink.

"Can I help?" Iku called, closing the curtains first.

"No, I've got it," he called back. "The laundry should be done soon, though, so put it in the dryer."

"Okay!" Iku replied, just as the washing machine's timer went off.

Once she had switched the laundry and returned the kitchen, dinner was laid out on the narrow table they had squeezed ingeniously into the small space.

"Ooh, it looks good!"

At first their cooking skills had been about equal, but men tend to get more absorbed in new hobbies, and now Atsushi cooked with the skill of a devoted hobbyist.

"I could totally see into the apartment from the windows when I got home."

"Oh yeah? I had better start closing the curtains earlier."

In good weather, the first one home usually opened the windows for a little ventilation.

"But it's nice when the other one is home first. It makes me happy to come home and have the lights be on already." Iku laughed. "When I look at the status board and see you've already gone home, it makes me smile."

"Oh yeah?" Doujou sat down, looking a little glum. "I like it when you get home before I do."

"But don't you like it better when you do the cooking?"

"That's the problem," Doujou said, scowling. It was the same scowl he had worn since Iku had enlisted. But after they started going out, Iku had realized that it wasn't because he was her superior officer. It was just his natural expression.

***fin.***